

BOOK 1

PARABLES

The Stories of Jesus

A NEW HOPE DEVOTIONAL **BIBLE STUDY**

INTRODUCTION

Parables are powerful teaching tools that God uses throughout scripture. When Jesus arrived on earth and announced His kingdom, He experienced immediate opposition from the Jewish religious leadership. The spiritual leaders of Israel remained stubbornly convinced that Jesus could not be the Messiah. To discredit Jesus, they eventually attributed all His miracles to Satan. Throughout this entire rejection process, Jesus used parables to expose their flawed thinking. God desires that what is reality in His throne room be recognized as reality by His people on earth. Like the Pharisees of Jesus's day, we can find ourselves creating our own realities and as a result fail to join God in what He is doing. When we insist that He share our earthly agenda, it never ends well.

As a staff at New Hope our sincere prayer is that this study might impact your soul. We pray that we all may come to a greater appreciation of God's nature, His activities, and our responsibility. We care greatly about your spiritual growth and understanding. We pray that you enjoy this study as deeply as we enjoyed creating it for you.

Blessings,

Rich Bruce
Discipleship Pastor

NEW HOPE CHURCH

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STORYTELLING

If we want to understand why God used parables to communicate to us, a good place to start is to think about children. Kids fill our souls with joy. They have an insatiable curiosity about their world, and each day is filled with discovery and challenge. We celebrate their progress with awe and delight. However, in a broken world, kids cannot survive without the critical knowledge their parents and grandparents possess. Without the understanding gained from their elders' years of experience, a child can have a difficult time grasping these essential truths. This means that caregivers must tailor the communication methods they

use to suit their child's level of maturity. God, our heavenly parent, chose storytelling and parable as one method to communicate truth about His reality in a way that is understandable to us humans.

Consider the following parable from Jeremiah 18:1-9. Jeremiah wrote in a time when Israel had given themselves over to idolatry, in rebellion against God. Israel had bowed to mankind's explanations of reality instead of bowing to the will of Reality Himself. They needed a new perspective. Jeremiah was raised up as God's storytelling ambassador.

Underline God's authoritative actions in the parable:

JEREMIAH 18:1-9

My words to you." Then I went down to the potter's house, and there I will announce something on the wheel. But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make. Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it."

Babylon was crushing Israel to near extinction through war and famine, as a punishment for their rebellion against God. In their suffering, Israel began to question God's authority and goodness. Just as a potter has the authority to identify blemishes in a pot he is crafting and to take authoritative action, God reminds us in this parable that He can and should do the same with Israel, the chosen people of His creation. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, eventually carried a small remnant of God's people into captivity, including men like Daniel.

Through this parable, we learn that God has the right to judge Israel's unlawful behavior. In the same way the potter is creator/owner of the clay, God owns His people. And as the master craftsman who knows exactly how to shape his clay, He can do with them as He wills.

As God's people, we can find rest in the Potter's loving hands as He shapes and molds us. Yet often we make the mistake of trying to put God on the potter's wheel to shape and form Him to our whims and wishes.

Consider the following facts:

1 Parables are stories with a singular meaning that transfer reality from a known realm to an unknown.¹ Parables appeal to something tangible that the hearers thoroughly understand (clay pots), and an analogy is then made that will convey reality to those who hear it. (Reality: God is authoritative like a potter is over clay.) This singular meaning greatly simplifies interpreting parables. When studying parables, we do not need to find allegorical meaning in every little facet of the story. For example: we do not need to concern ourselves with what the potter's wheel signifies or whom the clay represents.

2 A parable is a powerful form of discourse. As humans, we remember stories. They help us give meaning to the world around us. We especially remember stories that surprise us with hidden or double meanings. God created us, He owns us, and He knows how to communicate to us best. He chose parables as a means for us to learn Truth from His transcendent reality.

3 A simile requires the words 'as' or 'like' while a metaphor does not. One using a simile would say, "I am like a dog," and one using metaphor would say, "I am a dog." A parable can be understood as an extended simile.² The Potter was 'like' authoritative God subjecting the clay (His property) to his will. Parables are a story with one overarching meaning. Contrast this with an allegory, which is an extended

metaphor. In an allegory, each part of the story can represent a comparison or a truth. You can see these two teaching tools contrasted by comparing the parable in Isaiah 5:1-7 and the allegory in Psalm 80:8-16.³ **NH**



POINT TO PONDER

God is the wise potter; I am His unformed clay.



PRAYER POINT

Dear Craftsman God, As your creation, we find our worth in being the redeemed lump of clay on Your potter's wheel. May we restfully submit to Your authority, while You skillfully conform us to Your image.

RICH MAN POOR MAN

As fallen humans, we find it very challenging to be self-aware before others...and especially before God. There are times we sin and then shift the blame to others. Often, we stubbornly justify our wrong behavior. Other times, we take on the perspective of a helpless victim without considering our own involvement. We act like sin happened to us, instead of admitting that we committed it willingly. As broken humans, we have the capacity to be caught red-handed and still angrily deny any wrongdoing, even with our hand inside the “cookie jar” of sin. In those moments, we need God’s reality to be communicated to our hearts. We need God, with His perfect perspective, to tell us His version of the story.

King David enjoyed a wild ride to prominence. He was an unappreciated sheep-herder in an undistinguished family until the Prophet Samuel anointed him for special service to God. He killed the Philistine Goliath and eventually replaced King Saul

as the unopposed King of Israel. He pushed back God’s enemies on all sides and established Jerusalem as God’s holy citadel. He eventually gathered a harem consisting of several wives and concubines.

One evening, he spied the beautiful Bathsheba from his palace balcony. He sent for her and committed adultery with her. After he discovered that Bathsheba was pregnant, he viciously conspired to have her husband killed in battle. Uriah was murdered, the baby was born, and everyone just sort of...moved on. Everyone except God.

God was grieved. After the baby was born, He sent the court prophet Nathan to tell David a story. One that would bring self-awareness to David’s prideful soul. David was about to get a dose of God’s reality.

Try to picture powerful-but-clueless King David being brought to humble repentance by the following parable:

2 SAMUEL 12:1-7

Then the Lord sent Nathan to David. And he came to him and said, “There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a great many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb which he bought and nourished; And it grew up together with him and his children. It would eat of his bread and drink of his cup and lie in his bosom, and was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take from his own flock or his own herd, to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him; Rather he took the poor man’s ewe lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.” Then David’s anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. He must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion.” Nathan then said to David, “You are the man!”

In the parable, the rich man would have killed the pet lamb in a semi-public communal setting. The smell of the roasting pet ewe lamb would have wafted across the small town, as the laughter of the wealthy revelers was drowning out the

cries of the poor man and his devastated children. This parable set the stage for God’s reality to be passed on to David, to show him precisely what he had done. “You are the man!”

Consider the following:

1 Remember that parables have one overarching meaning. God's main point for this parable was to show that David was inexcusably guilty. David was no different than the wealthy man who stole a poor man's sole possession (pet lamb) when he stole Bathsheba from Uriah. Uriah, a foreigner, was one of the men who joined David when he was on the run from Saul. Uriah would have given his very life for David. David returned Uriah's loyalty by callously stealing his wife and having him killed by treachery.

2 David's self-awareness before God was clouded by cultural sentiment. Kings in the ancient world had "rights" to anything their eyes desired. They had absolute power over everything—and everyone—within their kingdom. The world would have applauded David's indulgence. David would have been encouraged by his culture to "do what makes you happy." Sound familiar?

3 David's relationship with God was permanent and unchangeable. However, his fellowship with God hinged on his willingness to obey God. David hindered his companionship with God by sinning against Him. God chose to see David for who He declared him to be, while allowing him to suffer the consequences of his sin. In the end he spared David's life, but He pronounced curses against his lineage. David was restored to

fellowship with God when he humbly admitted his actions were wrong.

4 Since each parable has one main point, this keeps us from using this parable as a sweeping indictment against wealthy individuals. Despite negative cultural sentiment, being wealthy is not a sin. If you own a vehicle, you are among the wealthiest people on the planet, comparatively.

How about you and me?

Are we refusing to be self-aware before the Spirit of God, just like David? Have we sinned and created a false reality, where we wrap up our deeds in platitudes like "it's all good" or "good vibes only?" David took great comfort in his secure identity and relationship with God, while openly grieving over the sin he had committed. He failed, but God did not see him as a failure. The process of conviction of sin, grieving, repentance, and restoration of fellowship should be a regular part of doing life with God. **NH**



POINT TO PONDER

While it is easy to weigh sin by the standards of others, the true bar of sinfulness is defined by God's character.



PRAYER POINT

Dear standard-setting God, We pray Psalm 139:23-24 with King David, "Search me [thoroughly], O God, and know my heart; Test me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there is any wicked or hurtful way in me and lead me in the everlasting way." (Amplified)

YOUR KINGDOM COME, YOUR WILL BE DONE

In order to understand Jesus's parables in the New Testament, we need to understand the vision of God for His kingdom. The Old Testament prophets assured God's people that a renewed kingdom was on the horizon. A time of renewal was coming,

when the messiah/king would enter Jerusalem in triumph and lead God's people to prominence again.

As we continue the study of parables, read the following verses carefully and underline the truths about God's future kingdom:

JEREMIAH 23:3-6

"Then I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and bring them back to their pasture, and they will be fruitful and multiply. I will also raise up shepherds over them and they will tend them; And they will not be afraid any longer, nor be terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the Lord. "Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; And He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; And this is His name by which He will be called, 'The Lord our righteousness.'"

ISAIAH 9:7

There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.

ISAIAH 6:8-9

Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!" He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; Keep on looking, but do not understand.'" (Hint: God's people will refuse kingdom truth)

ISAIAH 28:17

"I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the level"; (hint: God's righteousness will be required to enter the kingdom)

God chose the metaphor of a kingdom to paint a picture of life under God's perfect rule. God is foretelling a future time in which He will offer His people a literal kingdom on earth. He will reveal a Davidic king (Jesus) who will rule righteously and justly. We *must* understand these concepts in order to understand Jesus's parables.

Consider the following truths about God's kingdom on earth:

1 The terms Kingdom of God and Kingdom of Heaven can also be understood simply as "God's rule" or "place where God rules as king."¹ They could describe a literal place or be used metaphorically to summarize God's initiatives. The term "Kingdom of God" can also be used for concepts like the redemption of

mankind or even eternal life (John 3:3,5).

Think of it this way: the word “home” can be used to describe a literal physical house. Alternatively, we use it more abstractly to convey a sense of belonging, such as in the phrase home is where the heart is. In this sense, “home” is used for the feeling of being at home. The term “Kingdom of God” has many different facets as well. Sometimes it is referring to the literal future Kingdom of God on earth, and other times it is used to describe those more abstract concepts. When we sing, “build your kingdom here,” we are talking about bringing our local church and its activities under God’s control.

2 God’s righteousness is the requirement for entrance into the Kingdom of God. For God’s loyal subjects to dwell rightly under His kingly command, they first must attain His level of righteousness. The above verse (Isaiah 28:17) explains that the measuring rod God uses for His royal subjects is the just standard of His own righteous character. Those who do not measure up will not be granted citizenship in His kingdom. That being said, the beginning of Jesus’s ministry concentrated on deconstructing the idea that God’s righteousness can be earned by good works. Instead, Jesus used parables to bring tension to this discussion with the religious leaders to illustrate that righteousness comes from God alone. God’s righteousness must be gifted to unworthy recipients.

3 Parables are alluded to and prophesied about in the Old Testament. Psalms 78:2 says, “I will open my mouth in a parable;

and I will utter dark sayings of old.” This verse connects the recitation of ancient truth with the use of parables. Jesus’s surgical use of parables should have prompted His listeners to connect what Jesus was saying with truths from their distant past.

“Careful attention to these guidelines [proper Biblical theology] has led to the **4** conclusion that the principle of the kingdom of God as the outworking of His creation purposes best accommodates the multiplicity and variety of biblical revelation and best serves to integrate that revelation around a common theme...This monarchy [Davidic Kings] as an expression and development of priests of the Mosaic, Sinaitic Covenant was created to model God’s theocratic rule on the earth in history and to anticipate the rule of David’s dynastic son, the Anointed One, in the days to come.”²

As the time of Jesus drew near, God’s people were anxiously awaiting the fulfillment of the promises of the liberating kingdom of God. Rome was ruling them with an iron fist. They were languishing under unfair taxation, forced labor, and an overbearing military presence. The messiah/king God sent to save them was not the one they expected. Messiah would bring all things under God’s rule and measure all things against God’s righteousness. The Jewish leaders tried to bring Jesus under their rule, while measuring His activities against their own made-up standards of righteousness. **NH**

POINT TO PONDER

God is king. He makes the rules.



PRAYER POINT

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Matthew 6:9b,10

NOT WHAT THEY EXPECTED

Jesus began his earthly ministry in a hostile climate, both spiritually and politically. Politically, the children of Israel were languishing under Roman rule. At the same time, they were being held hostage spiritually by the humiliating legalism of the Pharisees. They cried out for a messiah-king who would finally set them free!

Unfortunately, the Jewish leaders had presupposed some things about the coming Messiah that made Jesus look like an imposter. They had anticipated a Messiah who was a charismatic political leader, reminiscent of King David. Jesus, however, arrived to offer God's righteous rule on earth, which he called the Kingdom of God.

Jesus's Sermon on the Mount was a jaw-dropping shock to the Jewish religious leaders. You could have heard a pin drop as Jesus taught ideas like "...unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

This teaching was a slap in the face to the proud religious leaders, who clung tightly to their old system of seeking God's approval through outward appearance and religious performance. Jesus spoke the following parable to expose the problem of trying to mix His new kingdom teaching with the old system of law and works:

MATTHEW 9:14, 16-17 Then the disciples of John came to Him, asking, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered, "...No one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved."

The meticulous scrutiny of Jesus and his disciples by John's followers provided the setting for this parable. They questioned why Jesus and his disciples did not fast like the Pharisees or the other devout Jews. Jesus shared this parable, involving fabric and wineskins.

Consider the following:

1 Fabric in the ancient world was first harvested from dirty sheep as wool. The wool was then cleaned, combed, dyed, and hand-spun into thread, painstakingly processed in a loom. This took weeks. No one in their right mind would cut material

from valuable new cloth to use it as a patch on an old garment that was about to be thrown away! Not only would the new cloth shrink at a different rate, the whole process would harm both fabrics.

2 When sheep were slaughtered, their skin could be used to ferment wine. A pouch of sorts was formed from the skin to hold the grape juice. The fermentation process required that the wineskin have considerable elasticity. This allowed the wineskin to expand as the fermenting wine created outward pressure on the skin. These could be used for several years until the skins lost their elasticity and were retired as water bottles.¹

3 Grapevines were cultivated over decades. The delicate fruit was cared for by pruning the vines, protecting the grapes from pests, and finally harvesting the ripened grapes. The workers placed the grapes in a winepress and squeezed out the juice by smashing them with their feet. The overwhelming amount of work involved in processing it made this grape juice very precious. Only a very foolish person would place something so precious in an old wineskin. Since an old wineskin would lose its elasticity, it would burst during the fermentation process, pouring the precious wine all over the ground.

4 We have considered the context in which Jesus spoke this parable, identified the listeners, and pinpointed the problem Jesus was trying to address.

With all those pieces in place, we can begin to interpret this parable correctly. Jesus was showing that the system taught by the Pharisees was old and outdated, like an old garment or wineskin. “Any attempt to superimpose the new doctrine on the old system would not only destroy the old system but the new as well.”²

What a disaster! The long-awaited messiah-king had arrived, and God’s people were using the wrong standard by which to judge Him. They tried to add His new Heavenly message to a man-made grid of religious ideas and presupposed experiences. To put it in a modern context, this was like improving a worthless flip phone by installing parts from the latest iPhone. **NH**



POINT TO PONDER

How many old patches do I sew on to the new truth in Christ?



PRAYER POINT

Dear Heavenly Father, You have declared me brand new and gifted me a new identity in Your Son. I confess my tendency to cloud my understanding of Your free gift of grace (new) by either trying to deserve grace or feeling entitled to it (old).

BLIND LEADING THE BLIND

Luke records the story of 12-year-old Jesus, ditching His parents after the Passover celebration in Jerusalem. After the festivities ended, Jesus's family travelled back a whole day before they realized He wasn't with them. They returned to Jerusalem in a panic. They eventually found Him in the temple, discussing theology with the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus amazed these scholars with His thoughtful answers to their questions. Interestingly, Annas (the high priest who ordered Jesus' death years later,) would have likely been in the audience along with Gamaliel, the esteemed Rabbi.

Joseph and Mary were understandably relieved to have found Him but were also heartbroken that He had left them in the

first place. They queried Jesus for an explanation. He simply replied, "You should have known I would be about my Father's business." He respectfully returned with his parents to Nazareth and "grew in wisdom and stature with God and men." (Luke 2:52)

At 30 years old, Jesus was widely recognized as an accomplished Jewish Rabbi. He gathered disciples to himself and taught the paradigm-shattering Sermon on the Mount. The same Jewish leaders who were amazed by His youthful wisdom years earlier were now resisting God's rule, as it was presented by Jesus. Jesus spoke the following parable to expose the hypocrisy of the men who claimed to speak for God while rejecting His plan.

LUKE 6:39-45

And He also spoke a parable to them: "A blind man cannot guide a blind man, can he? Will they not both fall into a pit? A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher. Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye. For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush. The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.

To the Jewish religious leaders at the time, Jesus was a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. He achieved notoriety in rabbinic tradition. He began an expected public ministry of teaching and discipleship. But to the great dismay of the Jewish leaders, Jesus also submitted to John's baptism, gathered disciples from humble backgrounds, healed on the Sabbath, and then enraged His listeners in

a synagogue by claiming to be the messiah-king (Luke 4:21). The enraged synagogue attendees tried to throw Jesus off a cliff (Luke 4:29,30)! Jesus then left Galilee and began to preach the Kingdom of God in cities surrounding Jerusalem. Imagine the tension at these meetings! The crowds adored the healer messiah, while the leaders they respected were viciously rejecting Him.

Consider how this parable would serve to expose the pharisaical leaders:

1 In the ancient world, walled cities like Bethlehem usually had one main gate. Each morning, the townspeople would leave the city to tend gardens, inspect their herds, and to use the “restroom.” The cities were surrounded by narrow, twisted pathways, ravines, and difficult foliage. Some of the dangerous landscape was built intentionally to provide the city better defenses against attack. Jesus was painting the picture of a blind guide (the Pharisees) trying to lead another blind person (God’s people) through a gauntlet of dangerous terrain. The listeners are envisioning both blind parties ending up helpless at the bottom of a pit.

2 In verse 40, Jesus made the point that it is the teacher that sets the tone for the student. If the teacher is untrained (or blind), the student will naturally follow. This seems to be both a rebuke to the Pharisees and a gentle reminder to those who followed them blindly.

3 We have all had an annoying bug or piece of dirt stuck in our eye. We dash for a mirror, armed with eye wash and high hopes for quick relief. In an ancient world without those luxuries, you would call over a friend to help identify the source of the irritation. Jesus used hilarious hyperbole in verse 42. Jesus asked his audience to imagine a

concerned friend showing up to help you remove the piece of dirt from your eye...but when they arrive, a whole tree trunk is stuck in their eye! This seems to illustrate the Pharisees picking at the sin issues of the people, while having glaring sin in their own lives. Jesus continually rebuked the Pharisees for this kind of hypocrisy.

4 If the cherry blossoms are destroyed by frost in Michigan, we can ship in cherries from Washington state. We are somewhat insulated from harsh, fruity realities. However, in the ancient world, a family’s fruit trees were given an almost god-like status. Their fruit was revered and savored as a sign of God’s blessing and favor, year by year. This makes verses 43-46 a powerful illustration. Good fruit does not come from worthless thorn bushes. Jesus was encouraging his listeners to consider the lives (fruit) of the Pharisees compared with their teaching. They taught a high moral standard, but their lives brought forth bad fruit, like their hatred for King Jesus.

The lesson is clear

The Pharisees were blind to God’s plan, God’s messenger, and their own need for God’s righteousness. They willfully rejected the truth about themselves and their hypocrisy. They were like hypocritical, blind guides, leading God’s blind people through rugged spiritual terrain. **NH**

POINT TO PONDER

We can be guilty of “reverse hypocrisy”. The usual hypocrite tries to be someone they are not (like Pharisees pretending to be righteous). The reverse hypocrite fails to be who God says they are. Reverse hypocrisy takes place when we are too afraid to represent God, even though we have been declared ambassadors of Christ.



PRAYER POINT

Dear Heavenly Father, may the light of Your word allow me to see Your path to the truth about myself and my desperate need of Your righteousness.

WISE VS. FOOLISH BUILDERS

Jesus's earliest ministry activity took place in and around Jerusalem, in the province of Judea. His early miracles (like turning water into wine), along with His first cleansing of the temple, received a mixed response from the crowds. During this initial ministry period, Jesus was able to preach the gospel to the religious leader Nicodemus (John 3:16).

After nine months in Judea, Jesus began to be pressured by the religious elite. John the Baptist was put into prison, and the Holy Spirit led Jesus to shift His ministry back to His home area of Galilee (Luke 4:14). He returned through Samaria, where He met the woman at the well (John 4:5-9). This non-Jewish woman stood in contrast with the religious leaders by embracing the Kingdom of God in faith.

Back in Galilee, Jesus's message of "repent for the Kingdom of God is near" was identical to that of John the Baptist's. Jesus revealed the principles of the Kingdom of God when He preached the Sermon on the Mount. He continued to draw the ire of the religious elite who followed Him with hostility and suspicion.

Jesus addressed this next parable to the conflicted crowd who were asking, "Is the dubious righteousness of the Pharisees enough to enter the Kingdom of God, or do I need God's righteousness gifted to me?" The confused crowd heard a very powerful message. Believe who you want to, but by design, the privilege of hearing God's Word creates the conditions for "building" something with it. If you are hearing it, you are building with it.

LUKE 6:43-49 "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? Everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and acts on them, I will show you whom he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock; and when a flood occurred, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who has heard and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house on the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great."

Remember that Jesus used parables to transfer reality from the heavenly realm to the human realm. In God's economy, there are only two classes of "stonemasons" or builders. Those who built on confidence in God's unshakable Word, and those who did not.

Consider the following:

1 Matthew records that the crowds were astounded by the Sermon on the Mount. "As a result of this sermon, the crowds of people following Jesus were amazed at

His teaching (Matthew 7:28). 'Amazed' (*exēplēssonto* lit. 'struck out') means 'overwhelmed.' It suggests a strong, sudden sense of being astounded and is stronger than *thaumazō* ('to wonder or be amazed'). Matthew used *gk.exēplēssonto* four times (7:28; 13:54; 19:25; 22:33). Jesus had just demonstrated the inadequacies of the Pharisees' religious system. The righteousness they knew was not sufficient for entering His kingdom." Scholars agree that the crowds who heard the Sermon on the Mount understood very clearly what Jesus was communicating about the Kingdom of God.¹

2 Many Michiganders have lived in a house with a “Michigan basement.” Before concrete was widely used in Michigan, builders would stack field stones of varying sizes and shapes for the foundations of homes and barns. These walls are notorious for having cracks that let water and critters in. To the untrained eye, these walls appear to be simple stacks of rocks. However, consider that these random stacks of rocks hold up 120,000-pound houses. In the ancient world, “These [stone] walls consisted of outer facing stones that created the exterior appearance of the building. Inner facing stones that were usually less refined and infill of smaller or broken stones that made up the space between.”² The stones were expertly arranged, so the stone wall would distribute the weight back onto itself and not buckle under the weight of the wall. Houses in Israel were built using this rocky type of construction. There is considerable scholarly evidence that Jesus was a stonemason. The terms used for Jesus as a builder are ambiguous enough to allow for this.³

3 Aesthetically, the two houses in the parable would have appeared identical to the casual observer. The difference was that a wise builder would have dug down to the unseen bedrock and begun stacking stones there, while the foolish builder would build right on top of the soil. The driving rain and ensuing flood would have revealed the integrity of the structure. It would have been impossible to discern the structural integrity until the storm hit.

This parable has a simple message. The crowds had to either believe God’s revelation in Christ or embrace the appealing teaching of the Pharisees. Those who embraced the idea that righteousness cannot be earned are wise builders. The storm of God’s judgment will test readiness for entrance into the Kingdom of God. The wise builders will enter God’s kingdom with His righteousness. The foolish builders ignore Christ’s teaching, build on a faulty foundation of works, and will lose the privilege of the Kingdom of God.⁴ **NH**



POINT TO PONDER

“According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” 1 Corinthians 3:10-11



PRAYER POINT

Dear Builder God, may my response to Your Word build an enduring legacy of faith on the unshakable foundation of the truth in Your Son.

CHILDREN IN THE MARKETPLACE

Jesus continued to minister in Galilee. Previously, the Pharisees would occasionally rebuke and test Jesus here and there. Now, however, they began viciously opposing His every move.

At this point in Jesus' ministry, John the Baptist was spending his tenth month in prison after rebuking Herod for his adulterous and incestuous marriage to Herodias. Possibly sensing the end of his life, John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus. John wanted to know if Jesus was the Messiah, or if they should look elsewhere (Luke 7:19). Even John had his doubts about who Jesus was. Jesus replied, "Go back to John and report what you have seen and heard: The

blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor" (Luke 7:21-23).

How about that? The Pharisees were supplanting God's word with their own traditions. The prophesied forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptist, was about to be beheaded in prison. The people were conflicted over who Jesus was, and no one seemed to recognize Him as the prophesied Davidic king! What would Jesus do in this situation? He would tell a parable.

Read the following parable carefully and write down a few observations.

MATTHEW 11:11-19

Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

"But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places, who call out to the other children, and say, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon!' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Human beings in the ancient world were assigned their value based on their ability to contribute to the survival of the family clan. Men could farm and fight, so they were at the top of the hierarchy. Immature children could contribute very little, so they took last place. To be compared to a child in the ancient world would have brought shame to those being addressed. In the case of this parable, the shame was intended to bring the listeners to repentance.

Consider the following about this parable:

1 Malachi spoke of a forerunner to Jesus (Malachi 3:1), One that would "clear the way" for the Messiah. John the Baptist was clearly identified by Jesus as that prophet. It is noteworthy that Malachi was the last prophetic voice in the Old Testament, and John was the first prophetic voice in the New Testament.¹ Jesus went on to say that compared to John's earthly ministry, those inaugurated into the Kingdom of Heaven (where God rules) are even greater than John.²

2 The unwillingness of the people to accept Jesus as Messiah was not because of biblical illiteracy. God's people pored over the scriptures. Scholars were constantly debating and commenting about the changes Messiah would make, both politically and spiritually. The sages of Israel concluded from their studies that Messiah would have to validate His ministry with miracles. They were anticipating that Messiah would heal a leper, cast out a dumb demon, and heal a man born blind.³ "Since in Judaism the healing of leprosy could only be expected from God, the conclusion was compelling that Jesus of Nazareth, who was healing people from leprosy, was sent from God and was acting with divine power."⁴ The leaders had plenty of biblical information and solid proof of Jesus's identity in His miracles. Unfortunately, they dreamt up an idea of Messiah and despaired that Jesus did not live up to their arbitrary standards.

3 Thursday was market day in ancient Israel.⁵ This allowed for enough time to prepare for the celebration of the Sabbath on Saturday. The town elders would gather on this day to hear court

cases. News would be exchanged and goods purchased. What would this be like? Try to imagine having a huge yard sale...at a large family reunion...in a busy public setting. Children would gather at these events, putting on mock weddings and playing the flute, or singing dirges at mock funerals. Jesus painted a picture of whiny children who were frustrated that no one danced at their mock wedding on market day.

Children playfully mock at weddings and funerals, with no real appreciation for the deeper meaning of those events. In the parable, these "children" (the Jewish leaders) wondered why Jesus and John refused to join in their fun little drama. God's people, like self-focused little children, are clueless of the events God is orchestrating in their midst. Jesus assured them that "wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (vs. 19). Jesus encouraged His people to consider His acts and John's and to draw an informed conclusion about the character of Jesus from scripture. Messiah is who God says He is. He is not the character they made up to cast in the play they created. **NH**



POINT TO PONDER

Do I cast the people around me in my dreamt-up play, only to whine when I play my "flute" and they won't dance for me? A better option is to look for God's activities and join Him.



PRAYER POINT

Dear Immovable Unchanging God, thank You for not conforming Your eternal activities to the whims of my immature expectations. I am Your child. Your activities create periods of unsettled unknowns for me. In those times where I might misunderstand Your purposes, may I trust Your Word more than the false reality I tend to create with my neighbors.

THE TWO DEBTORS

Life in ancient Israel was very public. How you lived was on display for all to see. People understood your character by the way you lived up to the principles and norms of the culture. Hospitality was no exception. Having a guest over in the ancient world was celebrated as an art form.

If a guest was perceived to be of a greater status than the host, great pains were taken to ensure that the needs of the guest were met, usually with boundless fanfare. The host's overtures of hospitality were often exaggerated. The front gate would be left open for neighbors and friends, so that they

could observe and critique the host's efforts. These spectators would know right away a host's true feelings about a guest, just by observing the details of the guest's treatment. So when a Pharisee invited Jesus over for a meal, it is likely that the goal was to humiliate Jesus. The Pharisees were looking for another occasion to make Him the subject of malicious gossip among the people. Remember the last parable about the Pharisees playacting like children. Carefully observe the details of Jesus's treatment in the following narrative and parable:

LUKE 7:36–50

Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner."

And Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he replied, "Say it, Teacher." "A moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. So which of them will love him more?" Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have judged correctly." Turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." Then He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven." Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" And He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

This story creates an incredible character contrast. The woman in the story (likely a prostitute) had two strikes against her. The first was her gender. The Pharisees believed that being touched by a woman resulted in ceremonial defilement. The second was her

occupation. Nevertheless, she arrived in the presence of the Lord to honor Him with very expensive perfume, and she left with her sins forgiven. Simon, on the other hand, invited the incarnate God to His house, and he treated God as an inferior guest.

Consider the following about this parable:

1 Israel was cured of national idolatry in Babylon centuries earlier. Before the Babylonian captivity, Israel would not stop worshiping the idols of their neighboring nations. After Israel returned from captivity, beginning in 536 B.C., the sect of the Pharisees was founded to safeguard the nation from incurring God's wrath again. Therefore, they created a set of laws that they hoped would keep God's people from punishment. In God's original 613 laws, there is no prohibition against merely touching a woman (unless she was ceremonially unclean herself...if she had leprosy or some other defect that made her "unclean," she could not be touched). But the Pharisees, in order to safeguard the people from angering God, created a law that prohibited any male from touching any female. This system created a punishing legalism, one which divided God's people into different spiritual classes. The leaders could do no wrong, and the people could do no right. The Pharisaical system was the stage on which they expected Jesus to perform.

2 All humans are born as unredeemed enemies of God. The Pharisee demonstrated his lost condition by adhering to a humiliating, self-righteous system of good works. Simon was a very "good" person, but nonetheless God still identified him as lost. The prostitute, on the other hand, lived out her lostness through desperate indulgence. The consequences of her lifestyle were different, but the Pharisee and the woman were both equally

lost before God. When the prostitute arrived and expressed repentant faith, God viewed her as righteous. She took on a new identity. She became who God declared her to be. Human opinions of her became inconsequential. The people could choose to see her for who God declared her to be or continue to define her by her past behavior. You and I should view others for who God declares them to be. When we do this, two different classes of people emerge. Saved people, beloved of God, and unsaved people, beloved of God. This perspective changes everything.

3 DaVinci's painting of the Last Supper is not inaccurate. People did not sit in chairs to eat in ancient Israel, especially not on the same side of the table. Instead, they reclined, resting on one elbow. Jesus would have reclined beside Simon on one elbow, with his feet protruding away from the table. The woman arrived as a servant and therefore could appropriately wash his feet like a servant. The little perfume jar was carved from alabaster rock. The jar and its contents were very expensive. Both of those things were probably purchased with earnings from prostitution. Nevertheless, Jesus looked beyond the earthly awkwardness of the moment and saw her broken, repentant heart. He will do the same for us.

The point of this parable is that those who are forgiven much, love much. The broken woman believed in the person of Christ and received complete forgiveness. As a result, she loved Jesus more than the Pharisee, who viewed himself as righteous enough. **NH**

POINT TO PONDER

The intensity of our love for God hinges on our understanding of how much He forgave us.



PRAYER POINT

Dear Forgiver God, I showed up at Your bloodstained feet in a hopeless, helpless condition of sin. I expressed faith in the work of Your son, and I left the cross with a new identity and a new beginning. Thank You that I now can view myself and other believers as brand new.

WHO IS JESUS, REALLY?

After the confrontation with Simon the Pharisee, Jesus began a second Galilean preaching tour. Luke records in chapter 8 that Jesus traveled with an entourage of disciples and other devotees. He continued to announce the Kingdom of God and to perform astounding miracles. Several women (including Joanna, the wife of Herod's household manager) traveled with Jesus. At a critical point, the crowds pressed in so hard against Jesus and His disciples that they could not even eat (Mark 3:20). Now try to imagine this rabble as they shoved into Jesus. Some yelling, others accusing, some advocating for Him, and prominent leaders even crying out to kill Him. Jesus's family even tried to haul Him off as they thought He was crazy (Mark 3:21)! For an exclamation point on this riotous gathering, the Pharisees brought in a man who was

blind, mute, and demon-possessed. The crowd waited with bated breath. What would Jesus do? If He did not heal the blind man, He would be considered a fake. If He did heal Him, the Pharisees would have to explain how He did it. Jesus healed the man. Imagine this man, newly-healed. He would have looked about, dumbfounded, at the previously unknown colors splashing over his mind like waves crashing onto shore. Intelligible words would have erupted from his soul and fell on understanding ears for the very first time. The crowd that had pressed into Jesus were now pressed to explain it. The people exclaimed, in shocked sarcasm, "This man cannot be the Son of David, can He?" The predictable Pharisees continued to act as the blind leading the blind as they tried to explain Jesus' miracle. Jesus responds to their desperate explanation with another parable:

MATTHEW 12:22–30

Then a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute was brought to Jesus, and He healed him, so that the mute man spoke and saw. All the crowds were amazed, and were saying, "This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?" But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons." And knowing their thoughts Jesus said to them, "Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand? If I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? For this reason they will be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can anyone enter the strong man's house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house. He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.

The scribes who came from Jerusalem could not dispute the authenticity of the miracle. They had watched it happen. A blind and mute person could now see and talk. The leaders had to fabricate an explanation, one that would both explain the powerful miracle and discredit Jesus at the same time. They decided to attribute the miracles of God to Satan. This is a critical turning point in the gospel narrative.

Consider the following:

1 Women followed Jesus as students and contributors. This was taboo in the ancient world. But God is not sexist. Women had a significant role in Jesus's ministry. Women are equal to men in value, intelligence, and responsibility. Men and women in the ancient world were both equally responsible to respond to the offer

of the Kingdom of God.

However, consistent with the original ideals evident in creation, the male disciples did the heavy lifting by taking on the main servant leadership roles. This required these men to courageously step out from the shadows and for the women to respectfully join their efforts as equals, but with differing roles. This ideal order is something you can try at home and at church.

2 The authoritative delegation from Jerusalem assigned Jesus's miracles to the power of Beelzebub, or Satan. Satan is spoken of throughout scripture as a created spirit-being, who began as a prominent angel and later led a rebellion against God. He took a myriad of fallen angels with him. "In considering the service these beings render to Satan, it is important to distinguish between demon possession or control, and demon influence. In the one case the body is entered and a dominating control is gained: while in the other case a warfare from without is carried on by suggestion, temptation and influence."¹ Scripture makes it clear that the believer in Jesus can be subject to Satanic influence, but a believer cannot be subject to demonic possession or control.

Satan has two main motives. The first is to extend Satan's authority, and the second is to hinder the purposes of God.² We should not be surprised that the gospel of Jesus is illegal in 50 countries or that Detroit hosts the largest Satanist Temple chapter in the U.S.³ In our world, Satan's influence makes

kid's soccer more appealing than celebrating with other believers at church. Sentiments, influenced by Satan, give us convenient excuses for not sharing the good news of Christ with unbelievers. We believe Satanic lies, we trade joy for cheap happiness, and we trade productivity for insane busyness.

Scholars have considered the fact that the Pharisees brought a man to Jesus who was both blind and mute; they speculate that he could have been chosen as a subject because he could not participate at all in the healing process. There would be no faking this miracle. In response to this great challenge, Jesus healed the man. After the religious leaders attributed the healing to Satan, Jesus defended His Heavenly authority with three resounding parabolic arguments. The first was that Satan would not free a man who was already under his control. This would be counterproductive to Satan's design, to subject all things to himself. Jesus then argued that since the Jewish exorcists cast out demons, which was attributed to God, how could they give Satan credit for what God is doing through Jesus?⁴ Lastly, Jesus claimed that he went into Satan's house (the possessed man), bound the strong man (the demon), and took away the spoils. Jesus argued that since He is able to dominate the spirit realm, He can establish the Kingdom of Heaven among them.⁵ They are either with Him and His kingdom, or against Him. There is no middle ground. **NH**

POINT TO PONDER

Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. 1 John 4:4

PRAYER POINT

Dear God of Strength, thank You for binding Satan and plundering His house. Thank You for ensuring that he can never control me. I pray for greater spiritual sensitivity to his deceitful philosophies.

THE EMPTY HOUSE

Jesus fulfilled all the messianic prophecies. He performed undeniable miracles that proved His identity. Yet the religious leaders spitefully resisted the work of God in Jesus. They had just disrespectfully explained away the latest miracle by crediting demonic spirits instead of the Holy Spirit. Jesus called giving Satan credit for the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit the “unpardonable sin” (Matthew 12:32).

Perhaps after contemplating the healing of the blind man and hearing the ominous news that they committed the unpardonable sin, the Pharisees regrouped. They approached Jesus again and requested

that He give them yet another sign to prove His identity. Maybe they were questioning their stance on Jesus and wanted one last sign to reassure themselves.

So, let’s think about this. Jesus turned water into wine. He was able to read minds. He healed sicknesses, cast out demons, cleansed leprosy, healed ailments as severe as paralysis and blindness, and had even raised a boy from the dead.¹ These should have been more than enough to prove Jesus’s identity as Messiah. Read carefully as Jesus rebukes this attempt to satisfy their curiosity and instead gives them another parable.

MATTHEW 12:38–45

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

“Now when the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came’; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. That is the way it will also be with this evil generation.”

Jesus rebuked the unbelief of the religious leaders by promising them only one more sign. He would give them the “sign of Jonah,” which is a reference to the three days that He would spend in the grave. He promised that the gentiles of Nineveh will fare better in the final judgment than the Pharisees. Why? The religious

leaders rejected the witness of One even greater than Jonah and Solomon. Jesus mentioned the gentile queen of Sheba (the queen of the south) who marveled at Solomon’s glory and credited God for his success (1 Kings 10:1-13). Jesus promised that the gentile queen would rise and condemn those rejecting Jesus.

Consider the following:

1 The word Jesus used for the adulterous generation is the Greek word *moichalis*.

In its literal sense, it means to have “wandering eyes.” It is used to describe a married person who made covenant promises and then begins to despise their covenant partner. *Moichalis* is a departure of the heart from a previous love and the desire to assign emotions to another².

In Ezekiel 16, God describes an attempted infanticide. A mother was disgusted by her newborn baby girl, so she threw it into an open field to die. God rushed to the baby’s aid and saved her from choking on her own blood. In the illustration, God tenderly nursed the child back to health and cared for her every need. As the child grew, she became vulnerable and unwanted in the ancient world. God took away her shame by entering a marriage covenant with her. The woman (Israel) repaid God’s kindness by using her wedding gifts to dress herself like a prostitute and by giving herself away to the surrounding nations. This passage in Ezekiel illustrates Israel’s adulterous rejection of God’s tender overtures of love and God’s brokenness over that rejection.

2 It is difficult to think of a sin that is “unpardonable.” But remember, context is the key to understanding difficult passages. King Jesus came and made a one-time offer to that generation: God’s Kingdom. When they credited Satan with the glory that rightly belonged

to God, God took away the privilege of the Kingdom of God. Since He would not change His mind about this, the sin became “unpardonable.” God chose not to remove the generational consequence of rejection. Since the conditions for these sins cannot be reproduced (Jesus is not physically here today doing miracles and offering a Kingdom), these specific sins cannot be committed today.³ This is not without parallel. Remember the generation that disbelieved God’s ability to take them into the Promised Land? God killed off an entire generation in the wilderness, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb.

The parable of the empty house seems to depict a nation (Jerusalem, and the whole Judean countryside) that repented at the teaching of John the Baptist (Mark 1:5). This is illustrated by the demon leaving the possessed man. After Christ was rejected as Messiah, the demon returned to find an empty house, swept clean. This indicates that John’s cleansing was temporary. Now that Jesus was rejected, it would be like seven demons entering the man. His end, or final judgment, would be worse because he repented at the teaching of John, and then brazenly rejected the Messiah John was announcing.⁴ That is spiritual adultery. **NH**

POINT TO PONDER

We are the beloved bride of Christ. God wrote His vows with the shed blood of His Son. Is my heart responding dutifully or lustfully wandering?



PRAYER POINT

Dear Lover of my soul, we are grateful for Your loving rescue. We confess our tendencies to respond apathetically to Your overtures and to seek other loves.



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