

BOOK 4

PARABLES

The Stories of Jesus

A NEW HOPE DEVOTIONAL **BIBLE STUDY**

INTRODUCTION

Jesus was laying low in Ephraim, approximately 30 miles northwest of Jerusalem. He had indicted the Jewish religious elites for being power-crazed hypocrites who were rejecting God's kingdom offer. Stinging rebukes like these caused them to put out a contract out on Jesus's life. Tension mounted when Jesus emerged from hiding to attend Passover. The disciples still held out some hope Jesus would establish His kingdom, but they were also fearing death at the hands of the Jewish leadership. The Pharisees who accompanied Jesus on the Passover journey were delighted that He was marching toward Jerusalem. They knew their comrades were waiting there to put Jesus to death. The common people were preoccupied with celebrating and seemed oblivious to the king of kings in their midst. Jesus seemed to be the only one concerned with eternal realities. Everyone else had their own self-focused earthly agenda.

Jesus told several parables on His week-long Passover journey and then told several more when He arrived in Jerusalem. Along the way, He let the little children come to Him, healed a blind beggar, and feasted with Zacchaeus in Jericho. He chastised those who were rejecting His rule, re-assured the disciples who loved Him, and prepared His followers for the time between His death and His return.

My son, Ric Bruce III acted as editor-in-chief. Katie Scott, missionary to Haiti, painstakingly proofread each lesson. Darla Prether, New Hope's graphic designer, labored with intensity to make this book so aesthetically pleasing. Samantha Fray, New Hope's website administrator, is doing a wonderful job establishing an online presence for "Parables, The Stories of Jesus."

Some of you will be studying this book in a small group setting. You will be encouraged to listen to Pastor Mark's sermon(s) on each lesson before discussing it in your small group. Some of the topics will ignite lively conversation. Jesus used controversial topics like divorce, slavery, and money to help make His points. I interpreted each parable for you but the Spirit of God will apply it individually to your life. Trust God to enable you to learn from His Word, love others sacrificially, worship Him exclusively, and pray diligently. We included a page with small group instructions that highlights both learning and doing.

Jesus dedicated His last parables to challenge us to live expectantly for His return. It is natural in the age of Covid-19, violent protests, and drama-filled politics to shift our focus from Jesus and on to our circumstances. Nevertheless, the Master calls us to be productive with what He has left in our trust, have the house ready to joyfully welcome Him back, and be scanning the horizon for signs of His arrival. Welcome to Parables, The Stories of Jesus, Book 4. We pray you enjoy this book as much as we enjoyed making it for you.

Blessings,



Rich Bruce, Discipleship Pastor

NEW HOPE CHURCH

2170 E. SAGINAW HWY | EAST LANSING, MI 48823 | NHCHURCH.COM

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The purpose of the Small Group Ministry is to be a vessel, through community, for discipleship. Small Groups are meant to reinforce the four scriptural principles set forth as the purpose of New Hope Church: "The purpose of this church is to glorify God by producing maturing followers (disciples) of Jesus Christ through the four scriptural principles of *Learning, Loving, Worship and Prayer*."

Small Groups will seek to accomplish this through creating a safe and supportive atmosphere for people to wrestle with the truths of God as they mature in their faith.

Based on this week's Scripture, sermon, and devotional reading, please consider the following questions:

GOD

Pastor Mark says, "What you believe about God determines what you do next."

- 1 What do you believe about God? What do you learn about God's character from this week's Scripture passage, message, and devotional?
- 2 What stirs up praise, love, or thankfulness to God? During prayer time, PRAISE HIM for who He is, His character, His attributes, or THANK HIM for what He has done/is doing.

DO

Pastor Mark says, "What you believe about God determines what you do next."

- 1 What do you learn about humanity or yourself specifically from this week's Scripture passage, message, and devotional?
- 2 Is there something God is asking you to do? What do you believe you are to do next? How will you seek to be obedient to what you are learning?
- 3 What is the tension/challenge in obeying God? Can you identify what you are feeling or what's causing a reaction?
- 4 How can your small group support you in yielding to what God wants you to do?
- 5 How can you pray for yourself or others according to these verses?

PRAYER TIME

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THE PERSISTENT WIDOW

In late 32 A.D., only a few months before Jesus's death, the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem put a contract out on His life. This caused Jesus to lay low on the East side of the Jordan River. Within a short time, a messenger arrived with the sad news that His friend Lazarus had fallen ill. Jesus began to make plans to go to Bethany, Lazarus's hometown – a mere two miles from Jerusalem! The disciples protested by saying, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?" (John 11:8). To make matters more perplexing for the disciples, Jesus announced to them that Lazarus had already died. While Jesus unwaveringly prepared for the dangerous journey, the disciple Thomas said, "Let us also go that we may die with Him" (John 11:16).

Lazarus's lifeless body had been decomposing in a tomb for four days when Jesus and the disciples arrived. Martha ran to the edge of town as Jesus approached. Scripture records that "...Mary stayed at the house. Martha then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not

have died. Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give you" (John 11:21-22a). Mary arrived and fell at Jesus's feet while a large crowd of mourners, including Pharisees, looked on. Scripture says, "He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled" (John 11:33). The Greek word used implies that Jesus's spirit became like a roiling, storm-tossed sea (tarasso in Greek).¹ Jesus, overcome with emotion, wept (John 11:35). Standing before the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus cried out, "Lazarus come forth". He miraculously emerged still wrapped in grave clothes. Martha and Mary rejoiced with Lazarus, but the Pharisees hurried to Jerusalem to meet with the Jewish religious leadership. The religious leaders concluded that Jesus was indeed performing crowd-pleasing miracles, Rome would destroy the Jewish nation on account of Jesus, and finally, that Jesus must die (John 11:45-48)! Jesus withdrew to a desert town called Ephraim to avoid capture (John 11:54). While the disciples considered the intensely dangerous circumstances they were in, Jesus encouraged them with the following parable:

LUKE 18:1-8 18 Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, 2 saying, "In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. 3 There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, 'Give me legal protection from my opponent.' 4 For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, 'Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, 5 yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.'" 6 And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge *said; 7 now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? 8 I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"

This parable does not compare God to an unjust, uncaring, earthly judge. God always acts fairly and deals graciously with His children. Instead, Jesus contrasted God

with this callous, earthly judge. In the ancient world, "halls of justice" were places rife with bribery and favoritism. The disciples could probably relate to the frustration of the poor

widow seeking justice where it was rarely found. If a callous judge would relent and give justice to the lowest member of society, how much more would a loving, caring God act quickly on behalf of those He has chosen to delight in?

Consider the following:

1 Here in the West when we muse about our origins, we tend to have a naturalistic type of thinking. We wonder if we could have evolved from a single-celled organism. In contrast, Greek mythology heavily influenced people in the ancient world. The myths taught “truths” such as the idea that women were defective males² who opened Pandora’s box and released evil into the world.³ These ungodly beliefs made women (and widows) into disadvantaged, second-class citizens. A woman lost her cultural identity and importance when her husband died. This left her destitute and vulnerable. Taking advantage of a widow, albeit uncomfortable to watch, would have been considered culturally acceptable by the judge in the parable.

2 The Romans had a highly developed and complicated legal system. Wealthy Roman citizens with strong political connections often became judges.⁴ Inheritances were generally settled without a jury trial. Even so, the defendant and the plaintiff were typically represented by advocates (lawyers) who would argue forcibly for their version of the “truth”⁵. God gave us a view into the Roman court system with the trials of Jesus and the Apostle Paul. Now imagine a despised widow looking for a sympathetic ear in that politically charged arena with no one to advocate for her.

The disciples were fearful because they stood to lose everything. By associating with Jesus, they could be unjustly banished from Judaism and even lose their lives. Jesus encouraged them with this thought - if an aloof, uncaring judge would grudgingly act on the persistent demands of a widow, how much more would God act quickly on behalf of His beloved chosen ones? I can picture the disciples mulling this over and deciding if they would petition judge God in faith or fret about their unjust circumstances. We face the same choice.



POINT TO PONDER

God will eventually even all the scores. That fact should both sober and encourage us as we petition God for justice.

FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

We have all suffered unjust circumstances of varying intensity. Let’s take those injustices to the throne of Grace and let Jesus argue our case in God’s presence. Let’s trust Him to act in His time and believe that, in the meantime, He views us as worthwhile and valuable.

PRAYER POINT

“Dear Avenger God, enable me to forgive those who have wronged me. You have all the facts of my well-argued case and you will bring about swift justice without delay. Thank you, God.”

THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

Picture a journey that you could take with your beloved friends and family to a relaxing location. You eagerly anticipate the opportunity to worship God with other members of your spiritual community from near and far...but you all have to walk there! Your friends and family from neighboring towns would join you on the road and you would participate in a time of fellowship, catch up on news and enjoy their company. For the people of Jesus's time, Passover began in this way every year. The people packed some food, closed up their houses and began walking to Jerusalem. Some journeyed just a few miles. Others travelled for days.

At the time, Jesus was staying in a village called Ephraim. The land of Ephraim

stretched west away from Jerusalem towards the Mediterranean Sea. While scholars differ on the exact location of Jesus's refuge, He likely walked between 30 and 50 miles to attend Passover. Men, women, children, and Pharisees paraded with Jesus toward Jerusalem. Above the din of the noisy crowd, the bleating of confused, sacrificial lambs could be heard. Each family had chosen a lamb without blemish to serve as a substitute for their sin. While the mixed crowd of condescending Pharisees and humble commoners were distracted with getting to Jerusalem, Jesus focused on the eternal destiny of His listeners. Along the road, Jesus paused to share the following parable about kingdom righteousness:

Luke 18:9-14

9 And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 10

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The Jews hated tax collectors as much as they admired the Pharisees. Common people perceived the Pharisees as the gatekeepers of Jewish spiritual heritage. The Pharisees leveraged God's promises to bless those who kept The Law by creating even more stringent laws to ensure God's blessing. The people would have naively applauded the legalistic system of the Pharisees that ensured

God's material and spiritual blessing on the nation. The men who collected taxes for the despised Romans were considered traitors. The people perceived that their loyalty to Rome contributed to the weakening of God's people by inciting His wrath. In the parable, the self-righteous Pharisee loathed the tax collector. He assigned an unfair identity to the man because of his profession. The tax

collector served the Roman government so God's people labeled him as worthless. Pharisaism (legalism) is believing that God assigns identity to a person based on their behavior. The Pharisee believed God viewed him as righteous because he obeyed rules humans had created. Similarly, the Pharisee presumed God saw the tax collector as worthless like he did.

Consider the following:

1 In the parable, the Pharisee and the tax collector prayed at the temple. The prayers in the parable took place during a festival like Passover. Jesus made the point that humble admission of sin and the application of sacrificial blood are both required to receive a verdict of "not guilty" from God. The proud Pharisee, who was unwilling to admit personal sin, left the place of sacrifice with a guilty verdict still hanging over him.

2 Admittedly, Christians can become accidental Pharisees. We tend to assign identity to (or label) those who exhibit certain behaviors. If a Christian fails to meet our expectations, we consider them as unworthy or somehow lower than us. For example, one could label, or assign identity to, a Christian who wears certain clothes or

drinks certain drinks. Pharisaism is especially destructive when believers expect unbelievers to act like Christians. We can become judgmental and contemptuously look down our noses at unbelievers instead of seeing them for who God says they are - His precious, but unredeemed creation.

However, as God's people, we do have the right to identify wrong behaviors in the life of a fellow believer. The Corinthian church body was rife with obvious sin. They turned communion into exclusive pagan feasts. Some of the believers weren't even allowed to partake at "communion". These outcast believers had to look on hungrily while others ate like gluttons (1 Cor. 11:21). One man was even sleeping with his stepmother (1 Cor. 5:1). The Apostle Paul carefully referred to the Corinthian believers as brothers and fellow saints (1 Cor. 1:2). He never labeled the sinning believers as unworthy rejects. Instead, he encouraged the believers to judge the man who was caught in adultery with his stepmother and make him leave the church body until he changed his behavior (1 Cor. 5:13). The loving practice of judging obvious, disqualifying sin in the life of a believer is not legalism. It is important to know the difference. Some Christians flaunt their immoral behavior and then cry, "legalism!" when other believers lovingly point out their error. **NH**

POINT TO PONDER

You are who God declared you to be. Others are also who God says they are. Don't tie your identity to what you do. Tie what you do to your identity in Christ.

FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Think of someone in your world you have labeled based on their behavior. Have you called anyone "worthless" or "hypocrite", etc.? Confess your legalism and trust God to help you see others for who He has declared them to be. When someone close to you points out obvious sin in your life, don't see yourself as a failure, but also don't accuse them of being legalistic or judgmental.

PRAYER POINT

"Father God, thank you that you view me complete in the shed blood of Your Son. I fail but you never view me as a failure. I pray that I can view others with the same gracious perspective."

THE LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD

Jesus, the God-man, was on a spiritual pilgrimage with His treasured people. He chose to spend the last two weeks of His earthly life travelling with those He came to save. While the crowds distracted themselves with thoughts of Passover, the disciples struggled to understand Jesus's prediction that He would die. The conniving Pharisees rejoiced as Jesus walked straight into the trap they'd laid for Him in Jerusalem!

Along the road, the Pharisees decided to ensnare Jesus in what they considered to be a lose-lose argument. They hoped to discredit Jesus in front of the people and turn the crowd against Him. They deviously asked Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?" (Matthew 19:3). The topic of divorce caused as much tension then as it does now. Jesus lovingly directed the people to the Scriptures and explained that divorce was not part of God's original plan (Matthew 19:4-6), that Old Testament Law allowed divorce as a difficult reality (Matthew 19:7-8), and that it was "better" (but rarely practical) for divorced people to remain unmarried (Matthew 19:10-12). Jesus's real-world but theologi-

cally sound answer silenced the Pharisees for the moment.

The crowds grew in number and became more celebratory as they passed each town. Parents began bringing their children to Jesus to receive a blessing from Him. The disciples chased the kids away but Jesus rebuked them harshly saying, "Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:4). Keep in mind that the children of Jesus's day were the antithesis of the Pharisees. Children were viewed as gullible and weak while the Pharisees enjoyed prominence. The Pharisees rejected Jesus but the children trusted Him completely.

Peter, the vocal disciple, exclaimed to Jesus, "Behold, we have left everything and followed you!" (Matthew 10:28). Jesus assured the disciples that, as a reward, they would occupy prominent places in the future kingdom and receive blessings in this life, but also endure earthly persecution (Matthew 19:28). Jesus then addressed the promise of rewards for faithful kingdom service by teaching the following parable:

MATTHEW 19:37, 20:1-16

"But many who will be first will be last: and the last: first". 20

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; 4 and to those he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went. 5 Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. 6 And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he *said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' 7 They *said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He *said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'

8 "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard *said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.' 9 When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. 10 When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 11 When

they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, 12 saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.' 13 But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?' 14 Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?' 16 So the last shall be first, and the first last."

We can all relate to the frustration of the workers who worked all day in the hot sun and received the same wages as those who worked just a few hours. Jewish people began counting hours from 6:00 a.m.¹ According to the parable, the owner hired workers at 6:00 am, 9:00 am, noon, 3:00 pm and the last group at 5:00 pm. The first group worked 12 long hours and the last group worked only one hour. The workers who had been hired that morning felt like they deserved more than the workers hired later in the day. The owner of the vineyard argued that he had the right to pay whatever he felt was fair.

Consider the following:

At the time of Jesus, Hillel was the president of the Sanhedrin. He and his followers believed that a man could divorce his wife, even for petty, selfish reasons. Shammai, vice president of the Sanhedrin, advocated for an entirely different view. He taught his followers to follow the law closely in all religious matters, including divorce.²

The School of Hillel gave Jewish men religious justification to sentence their uncared-for wives to begging and even prostitution on a whim. The Pharisees deviously tried to drag Jesus into a drama filled argument by inviting him to debate the fleeting opinions of men. Instead Jesus took them to God's original design ideals (His heart) and lovingly won the argument. We should do the same when discussing controversial topics like gender identity and sexual orientation.

Jesus used this parable to clearly teach that God will indeed reward for sacrificial service. However, He reserves the right to reward as He sees fit. Jesus reiterated, "But many who are first will be last; and the last, first" at the beginning and at the end of the parable (Matthew 19:30; Matthew 20:16). Human wisdom will perceive inequities in how God metes out reward, but God has the right to reward who and how He pleases. He is the King of Kings. **NH**

POINT TO PONDER

Our experience in eternity will be tempered by the faithful, sacrificial service we did (or didn't do) on God's behalf here.

FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Get before the Spirit of God and ask where you can become productively involved in what He is doing around you. Realize that God will reward your present selfless sacrifices in eternity.



PRAYER POINT

"Generous God, I am thankful that You will reward me justly for rendering the acts of service for which I was created. Help me to serve You wholeheartedly."

THE TEN MINAS

As the group continued to Jerusalem, Jesus's disposition began to amaze the disciples and frighten the crowds (Mark 10:32). He commandingly took the lead of the procession and pressed toward Jerusalem with fierce determination. Nearing Jericho, Jesus pulled the twelve disciples aside and spoke to them privately. He prophesied to them that the chief priests would betray Him, gentiles would sadistically kill him, and that on the third day He would rise from the dead (Matthew 20:17-19). It seems the disciples continued to live in denial based on what James and John did next. They approached Jesus and boldly asked to be seated on the right hand and the left hand of Jesus in His Kingdom. Jesus had recently taught on not competing for earthly position and stated that the "first will be last and the last will be first" (Matthew 20:16). James and John revealed their hearts by requesting pre-eminence and not servanthood. Jesus rebuked them by stating flatly that God alone decides who will sit on His right hand and left (Mark 10:40).

The Passover procession arrived at the outskirts of Jericho, a mere 15 miles from Jerusalem. A blind beggar named Bartimaeus began crying out, "Jesus son of David, have mercy on me!" (Luke 18:38).

The crowd tried to quiet him, but he cried out even louder. Jesus took notice, called Him near, and asked him what he wanted. He said simply, "Lord, I want to regain my sight," (Luke 18:41). Jesus touched His eyes and healed the man.

As Jesus made His way through town, a Jewish tax collector named Zacchaeus climbed a tree to catch a glimpse of Him passing by. Jesus looked up at him and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house," (Luke 19:5). The Jewish crowds would have been appalled that Jesus ate with a traitor like Zacchaeus. However, during dinner, Zacchaeus confessed to overcharging taxes for Rome, promised to give half of all he owned to the poor, and further agreed to generously return the tax money he had stolen. Jesus responded by saying, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost," (Luke 19:9-10). The healing of the blind man and the salvation of Zacchaeus re-kindled a desire for God's kingdom. Jesus dispelled the notion that He would establish His kingdom upon arriving in Jerusalem by relating the following parable:

LUKE 19:11-27

11 While they were listening to these things, Jesus went on to tell a parable, because He was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately. 12 So He said, "A nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return. 13 And he called ten of his slaves, and gave them ten minas and said to them, 'Do business with this until I come back.' 14 But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.' 15 When he returned, after receiving the kingdom, he ordered that these slaves, to whom he had given the money, be called to him so that he might know what business they had done. 16 The first appeared, saying, 'Master, your mina has made ten minas more.' 17 And he said to him, 'Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing, you are to be in authority over ten cities.' 18 The second came, saying, 'Your mina, master, has made five minas.' 19 And he said to him

also, 'And you are to be over five cities.' 20 Another came, saying, 'Master, here is your mina, which I kept put away in a handkerchief; 21 for I was afraid of you, because you are an exacting man; you take up what you did not lay down and reap what you did not sow.' 22 He said to him, 'By your own words I will judge you, you worthless slave. Did you know that I am an exacting man, taking up what I did not lay down and reaping what I did not sow? 23 Then why did you not put my money in the bank, and having come, I would have collected it with interest?' 24 Then he said to the bystanders, 'Take the mina away from him and give it to the one who has the ten minas.' 25 And they said to him, 'Master, he has ten minas already.' 26 I tell you that to everyone who has, more shall be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. 27 But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence."

In the parable, the nobleman went away to receive a kingdom. The citizens there rejected Him as king. They even sent an official delegation after him to make it known they did not want him as king. The departing nobleman had left minas (each was worth about three months wages) in the care of slaves. He received his kingdom, despite the opposition, and then returned to see what each slave had produced with their minas.

Consider the following:

Jesus may have alluded to specific historical events with this parable. Archelaus, a son of Herod the Great, was left out of his father's will when He died. Archelaus left servants in charge while he appealed His

case before Caesar in Rome. A part of his delegation deserted him and supported another candidate. Despite this setback, Archelaus received the Kingdom of Judea and half of Samaria. He triumphantly returned as King and rewarded those who remained loyal in his absence.¹

On the outskirts of Jerusalem, Jesus tried to reshape His follower's expectations. Just like the nobleman in the parable, Jesus was about to go away to receive a kingdom from Father God. Jesus explained that He would return to reward those who trusted Him and stewarded His resources well. Those who rejected His rule would be banished from His presence. **NH**

POINT TO PONDER

We live in between the 'already' of our salvation and the 'not yet' of our eternal glorification with Jesus.

FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Think of all your spiritual resources in Christ as "investment capital". Before the Spirit of God, ask yourself honestly, "Am I investing well or am I squandering investment opportunities because of fear and neglect?" Examine the evidence of your life and be honest with God.

PRAYER POINT

"Intentional God, you gifted me with all of my spiritual blessings in Christ to bless others. May each day be marked by calculated, well-intentioned investment in your kingdom purposes. Amen."

THE TWO SONS

Six days before Passover, Jesus stopped in Bethany - just two miles from Jerusalem. Lazarus, Mary, and Martha hosted a banquet for Jesus. While they were reclining at the table, Mary broke a jar of expensive perfume, worshipfully poured it over Jesus's head, and wiped it on His feet with her hair. The disciples and those watching recoiled in shock and disgust. The perfume was worth an entire year's wages! "What a waste!" they thought. Jesus ordered them to leave Mary alone and declared, "...she has anointed my body beforehand for the burial," (Mark 14:8). The crowd that travelled with Jesus pressed on to Jerusalem proclaiming the news that Jesus had arrived in Bethany. A large group of Jews from Jerusalem dropped everything and hurried to see Jesus.

Jesus arose Sunday morning and began walking west toward Jerusalem. As He reached the Mount of Olives, He paused and took in the view of the city spread out 300 feet below. Jesus sent two of the disciples to a nearby village to fetch a colt to ride on. Admiring crowds lined the road as Jesus descended into Jerusalem. Blanketing the path with their coats and olive branches, they cried out, "Hosanna to

the Son of David; Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!" (Matthew 21:9). The Pharisees objected to the crowds referring to Jesus as messiah so He declared, "I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!" (Luke 19:40).

He spent the remainder of that day in Jerusalem but returned to Bethany for the night. In the morning, before He entered Jerusalem again, Jesus grew hungry. He spied a nearby fig tree and approached it hopefully. When He discovered the tree had no figs, He cursed the tree. Jesus declared that no one would ever taste fruit from that tree and it immediately withered and died (Mark 11:12-14).

In Jerusalem, a confusing scene of worshippers buying and selling merchandise in the Court of the Gentiles in the temple greeted Jesus. In a fit of rage, Jesus overturned their tables and drove them from the temple. The enemies of Jesus heard about this and desperately wanted to kill Him but they feared the crowds (Mark 11:15-18). The Jewish religious leaders fumed, the hopeful crowds admired, and the disciples wondered. Jesus dropped His next parable into this sea of tension:

MATTHEW 21:28-32

28 "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.' 29 And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he regretted it and went. 30 The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, 'I will, sir'; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.

The sons in the parable were ordered by their father to go into his field and work. They were not given a choice. The first son, who refused to cooperate initially, eventually submitted to His father's authority and went to the field. The second son paid meaningless lip service to his father and never went to the field.

Consider the following:

Patriarchy is the cultural concept of absolute male authority and was taken very seriously in the ancient world. Today, we tend to promote individual rights and empathize with the sons. Perhaps we picture a father issuing heartless commands, callously forcing his sons to work. In contrast, people in the ancient world found their purpose in contributing to the survival of a clan. Those who disobeyed the patriarch could have been punished severely or in some cases killed.¹ Deuteronomy 21:18-23 speaks of stoning a rebellious son and then dishonoring his

memory by hanging his corpse in a tree. The sons in the parable committed capital crimes by rebelling against their father's authority.

This parable provided another stinging rebuke on the stubborn Pharisees. Jesus likened them to a rebellious son who pretentiously ignored his father's authority while merely going through the motions of obedience. Father God commanded the Pharisees to embrace His kingdom program by working in His harvest field. He compared the tax collectors and sinners who repented at the teaching of John with the son who initially refused the father's authority but later changed his mind. Jesus drives His point home by appealing to the fact that the Pharisees witnessed these remarkable conversions but remained hardhearted. The fact that God's authority in our lives is likened to the absolute power of an ancient patriarch should give us pause. **NH**

POINT TO PONDER

Our Patriarch, the creator of all truth, sits on Heaven's throne. We do not.

FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Take a spiritual inventory and see where in life you have dethroned God and enthroned yourself. Set measurable goals to align your efforts with God's program of evangelism and discipleship. Start by telling just one person the Good News this week.

PRAYER POINT

"Dear God of all authority. May each day be marked by my humble submission to Your commands and restful cooperation with You. Thank You for mindfully involving me in Your important work here on earth."

THE OWNER OF A VINEYARD

The Pharisees, angered by Jesus' actions during Passover week, grew increasingly hostile. In the previous parable, Jesus had brazenly announced that tax collectors and prostitutes would gain entrance into the kingdom of God ahead of them! Not only had Jesus exalted Himself in the eyes of the people with His kingly entrance on Palm Sunday, but He also undermined the authority of the Jewish religious elite when He threw the corrupt businessmen out of the temple courts. The Pharisees desperately plotted to discredit Jesus and win over the crowds. They asked Jesus this leading question, "By what authority are You doing these things, or who gave You this authority to do these things?" Jesus wisely replied, "I will ask you one question, and you answer Me, and then I will tell you by what authority I do

these things." He then asked, "Was the baptism of John from Heaven, or from men? Answer Me." (Mark 11:28-30) Jesus caught the Pharisees in their own trap. If the Pharisees claimed John's teaching originated in heaven, Jesus could rightly point out that they did not repent. If the Pharisees instead claimed John made up the teachings himself, the people would have picked up rocks to stone them for insulting their beloved prophet.

The Pharisees refused to tell Jesus the source of John's ministry, so Jesus declined to tell the Pharisees whose authority He operated by (Mark 11:32). Jesus's silencing of the religious elite created a teachable moment for the following parable:

MATTHEW 21:33-41 "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard and put a wall around it and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. 35 The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. 37 But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38 But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' 39 They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?" 41 They *said to Him, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the *proper* seasons."

In the ancient world, the owner of a vineyard had dictatorial rights over it. The lowly stewards that worked his land had no rights at all except to keep their end of the bargain. In the parable, they decided to rebel and take the man's vineyard from Him. They beat those he sent as representatives and eventually killed his son. In a culture that included binding verbal contracts,

humble acceptance of one's fate, and nonnegotiable owner rights, their indefensible mutiny would have riled the original hearers.

Consider the following:

1 Joshua, Caleb and their desert dwelling comrades, who spied out Canaan in the book of Numbers, discovered lush,

beautiful vineyards in the land God promised them. As God's people left the wilderness, built their homes and tended vineyards in Canaan, fruit laden vineyards became visual assurances of permanence, rest, and security for God's people. "For the Hebrews, an ideal picture of life was a sedentary one in which a man could remain peacefully in one place, cultivating a plot of land, and sitting under his vine" (1 Kings 4:25).

2 Vineyards are as rewarding as they are labor intensive. Varmints can burrow down and destroy the precious trunk and root system. Birds can steal grapes and enemies can make off with the harvest. Ancient people often erected towers like the one mentioned in the parable to keep a diligent watch over the vineyard and the crop. When a grapevine enters its dormancy stage and loses all its leaves, it needs to be meticulously pruned by skilled workers so the vine will preserve precious carbohydrates for the next growing season.

3 In the Old Testament, God used vineyards as relational metaphors. In the book Song of Songs, the two lovers used a vineyard analogy as a test for the

maturity of their relationship (Song of Songs 7:12) and for how they cared for their bodies (Song of Songs 1:6; 8:12). In Isaiah 5:1-7, Isaiah sang a reflective song about God, the landowner, exerting backbreaking labor to create a pristine vineyard. He chose a fertile hill, worked the ground carefully, removed the stones, and built a tower in the middle of it. After carving a winepress out of rock, God waited with loving anticipation for its choice fruit. When the vine finally bore grapes, God approached it hopefully only to find the vine was bearing rotten fruit (Isaiah 5:2)! Justifiably, He destroyed the vineyard which represented Israel and Judah.

The Pharisees felt the sting of conviction. The message of the parable is clear. God had created Israel, His vineyard. He appointed the spiritual leaders of the nation as caretakers. They rejected His program and replaced it with their own legalistic, power-crazed version of it. They killed the servants of God and were getting ready to kill the Owner's Son. God was judging the rebels by withdrawing His kingdom offer and appointing other caretakers for His program of redemption. **NH**

POINT TO PONDER

God's present "vineyard" is Grace and you are His caregiving ambassador.

FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Bearing fruit in God's present program involves abiding in Christ, offering the free gift of salvation to others in your world, and watching carefully over their spiritual growth. Recognize that God is cultivating the hearts of those around you. Ask the Spirit of God to show you who and how you can reach out.

PRAYER POINT

"Dear Vineyard Owner, our tendency is to create our own version of Your program that suits us better. Help us to discern where You are at work and get with Your program."

THE WEDDING BANQUET

In the previous parable, God created an idyllic vineyard setting. He made a watchtower, carved a winepress out of solid rock and nurtured a beautiful fruit-filled vine. The stewards of the vineyard were placed there to care for and enjoy the benefits of the owner's vineyard. When the Owner required the customary respect and payment for leasing His "vineyard", Israel rebelled by abusing the prophets and they were even making plans to kill the Owner's Son! God brought those "wretches to a wretched end" by taking the kingdom opportunity away from them. The idea of a postponed kingdom for Israel,

eternal punishment for rejecting Jesus, and God beginning a new redemptive program were woven through Jesus's final teaching sessions.

While the Pharisees digested the bitter pill that Jesus had called them "wretches", Jesus hit them with another shocking parable. In a culture that prided itself on the art of hosting and graciously attending extravagant feasts, the following illustration would have sickened the original listeners. Jesus painted an appalling word picture of privileged guests contemptuously snubbing an opportunity to feast with a king at his lavish banqueting table.

MATTHEW 22:1-14

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, 2 "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. 3 And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. 4 Again he sent out other slaves saying, 'Tell those who have been invited, "Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast."' 5 But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, 6 and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. 7 But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. 8 Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.' 10 Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests.

11 "But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, 12 and he *said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?' And the man was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14 For many are called, but few are chosen."

The king would have presented each guest with a "save the date" wedding invitation at the betrothal ceremony of the bride and groom. A year later, the feast was ready. Unbelievably, the guests rejected the king's first invitation. The kindhearted king graciously extended a second invitation. He even ordered the servants to entice the

guests with mouthwatering descriptions of royal food. Nevertheless, the invitees were too busy with their own affairs. Others inexplicably beat and even killed some of the king's spokesmen. The enraged king sent his army to destroy the guests and burn down their town. He compelled his servants to invite anyone they could find to

his feast. When he found someone without wedding clothes, he had him bound and cast into outer darkness.

Consider the following:

1 The last three parables have had a common theme. The parable of the Two Sons, the Vineyard Owner and now the Wedding Banquet featured authority figures dealing with rebellious subjects. In these parables, God depicted Himself as a father who authoritatively doled out responsibilities to His children, a vineyard owner who hired caretakers and now finally He is the preparer of a sumptuous feast for His honored guests. He sees those of us who believe in His Son as His obedient children, responsible caretakers of His vineyard and invitees to a feast fit for kings.

2 In scripture, weeping and gnashing of teeth, is used as a metaphor to describe the horrors of an afterlife without God. Psalm 112:10 states, “The wicked will see it and be vexed, He will gnash his teeth and waste away.” Jesus gave a shocking description of Hell in Matthew 13:49-50, “So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and

take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will throw them into a furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”. The fact that our unredeemed friends and relatives could be among those suffering should add a sense of urgency to our efforts to share the good news of Jesus.

God invited men and women into His kingdom. His rule, that Adam and Eve abandoned, was graciously offered to that generation. He likened this offer of kingdom citizenship to being invited to a royal wedding. God’s original invitees, the people of Jesus’s time, rebelled and chose self-rule. Others missed the eternal significance of God’s offer and busied themselves with mundane activities. Still others, like the Pharisees, scoffed at their need of God’s rule in Jesus and violently opposed it. **NH**

POINT TO PONDER

God’s rule should not feel like a joyless obligation. Instead, we should choose to view His rule the way Jesus depicts it: as a joyous wedding feast.

FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Read Ephesians 1-3 and discover all that God says about you. Make a list and ask the Spirit of God to energize you with those truths while laboring in His vineyard. Consider placing some gospel tracts in your vehicle to share with others. (Recommended: “How to become a Christian” by Billy Graham)

PRAYER POINT

“Dear God, Thank You for the invitation to feast with You at Your table. Embolden me to share the Good News with those who have not yet accepted Your kind offer.”

THE FIG TREE

The admiring crowds sat at Jesus's feet hanging on His every word. It was Tuesday afternoon of Passover Week and the enemies of Jesus were beside themselves. The Herodians, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees hated each other. However, these bitter Judaic sectarian rivals teamed up to humiliate Jesus. They hatched a plan to send their intellectual heavyweights to pummel Jesus with seemingly unanswerable questions. The Herodians and Pharisees approached Jesus pretentiously and asked, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?" (Matthew 22:16b-17).

To the bystanders it seemed that Jesus was trapped. The Romans could have killed Him for telling the people not to pay temple tax and the Jewish people would have stoned Him for telling them to give "God's money" to the hated Romans. However, Jesus confidently asked to see a coin. He asked whose picture was stamped on it. When they responded that it was Caesar's picture, Jesus said, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's," (Matthew 22:22). Jesus's wise answer destroyed their argument and left them speechless.

Next, the Sadducees, who did not believe in a bodily resurrection, attempted to trick Jesus with a hypothetical question. They asked if seven brothers each married the same woman who was widowed after each successive brother died, whose wife would she be in heaven? Jesus explained that in heaven, people will not marry. He reminded them that Moses had called God, "the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:15). Moses had spoken of the dead as alive thus proving a bodily resurrection. They were left reeling at Jesus's answers.

Then a legal expert asked Jesus which commandment was the greatest. Jesus quickly declared, "Love God with all your heart..." and, "love your neighbor as yourself," (Mark 12:29-31). When the legal expert responded in agreement, Jesus had compassion on him and said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God," (Mark 12:34). Jesus's tenderness toward the legal expert "won" the final argument. Jesus effectively silenced His knowledgeable critics.

Before the Pharisees could disburse, Jesus hit them with a loaded question. He asked, "What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?" (Matthew 22:41). When they smugly responded that the messiah is the son of David, Jesus turned the tables on them by asking why David called the messiah "Lord" in Psalm 110? The Pharisees were speechless. Jesus used the scriptures to show that the messiah must be both human and divine, both of which Jesus had proven Himself to be. "No one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question," (Matthew 22:46). The Pharisees faced a choice. They could change their mind about Jesus or murder Him. They chose the latter.

Jesus turned to the crowds and launched into seven indictments on the humiliated Pharisees. He accused them of leading people away from the kingdom of God, misleading those who had converted to Judaism, swearing oaths to excuse themselves from following the laws they made, indulging their greedy appetites, hypocritically covering up their evil deeds, and harboring murderous desires¹ (Matthew 23:13-32). Jesus finished His rebuke by saying in effect, "Go ahead and finish what your murderous ancestors started and kill me too!"² Jesus then transitioned into a discussion of last days events. He prophesied horrific destruction for Jerusalem and spoke of a dreadful end

disciples struggled to process this sobering news, Jesus spoke the next parable.

Matthew 24:32-34

32 "Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; 33 so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door. 34 Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

Consider the following:

In Greco-Roman mythology, Zeus had a son named Zagreus. Zagreus came under the spell of the evil Titans. Zagreus turned himself into a bull to hide from the Titans, but the Titans figured it out and killed Zagreus. In a rage, Zeus swept in and destroyed the Titans and the remains of Zagreus with lightning.³ The Greeks believed that humans spawned from the mixed ashes of that nightmarish scenario. People in the ancient world concluded that humans had the good soul of Zagreus and the evil body of the Titans. This belief drove the Greeks to sculpt their bodies with punishing training regimens. They tried to hold the "evil" body in check while they cultivated the "good" in their soul with the arts and humanities.

The Sadducees, influenced by this Greek thinking, could not conceive of taking on

another corrupt body after death. Scholars identify this ancient philosophy as dualism. This helps explain why the early church struggled with legalism and the Corinthian church struggled with the idea of a bodily resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:18-20). Behavior is built on belief.

In Israel, the blossoming of the fig tree marks the end of the long winter season and beginning of Summer. Jesus spoke this parable to comfort Jews who will convert to Christianity during the Great Tribulation. Midway through the Tribulation, the antichrist will desecrate the rebuilt temple, committing the Abomination of Desolation (Daniel 9:27). This will serve as a comforting sign that Jesus will return at the end of the Tribulation, just like a blossoming fig tree signals the arrival of Summer.⁴

NH

POINT TO PONDER

God's program for the end of the age is right on schedule.

FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Think about the events happening in our world and then prayerfully read 2 Timothy 3:1-4:8.

PRAYER POINT

"Dear God of eternity, thank You for communicating all that You want us to know about end times events. May we live restfully convinced that You are both good and in control."

THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE

The scathing accusations against the Pharisees, found in Matthew 23, served as Jesus's last recorded public words. As He and His disciples left the temple compound that Tuesday afternoon, the disciples began pointing out the majestic beauty of the temple. While the disciples gazed mesmerized at the elegance of the temple, Jesus said abruptly, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down," (Matthew 24:2). Jesus's words cut them like a knife. Generations of their ancestors had met with God on that holy temple mount. Now Jesus had just pronounced a catastrophic destruction on Jerusalem and God's temple!

Jesus led His somber disciples away from the city to the Mount of Olives. With the city of Jerusalem in the background, the disciples posed three pressing questions. They asked when Jerusalem would be destroyed, what would be the sign of His second coming to establish His Millennial Kingdom, and what would be the signs for the end of the church age (Matthew 24:3;

Mark 13:6; Luke 21:8-9)?

Jesus brought the disciples' scattered thoughts back into sharp focus by answering the third question about the end of the church age first. He foretold specifics about their future ministry experiences in His absence. He assured them that they would scatter the good news of salvation into the far reaches of the empire and that they would win many souls. Jesus also warned them they would experience merciless persecution, their families would reject them, and that their fellow countrymen would hunt them down and kill them. Jesus assured His sobered followers that they would receive "divine utterance" even in torturous moments while standing before their persecutors (Mark 13:9-13, Luke 21:12-19).

This ominous news may have left the disciples wondering, "Is discipleship worth the cost? Will I have what it takes? How much do I love Jesus?" Jesus helped answer questions like these when He spoke the following parable:

MATTHEW 24:43-44 43 But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. 44 For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.

The term "head of the house" (oikodespoteo in Greek) describes an absolute ruler over an estate or household. A ruler of an estate would certainly mobilize a defense if he knew that an attack was imminent. In that same way, the disciples heard the warnings about the end of the age. Jesus wanted them to live "ready" for His return.

Consider the following:

Jesus's message from the Mount of Olives has become known as the "Olivet Discourse". It answered the disciples' three questions about the end of the age.¹ He delivered it on Tuesday evening right after indicting the Jewish religious leadership and

before preparing for Passover and partaking in the Last Supper. He answered their questions about when Jerusalem would be destroyed, and His millennial reign established. Jesus informed them that difficulty does not necessarily signal the “end” but that end times persecution should be an expected feature of the church age.² This sobering news tempered the disciple’s expectations that they would begin reigning with Jesus in their lifetimes.

Imagine squeezing into a crowded elevator in a busy downtown building. Just as you glance at the capacity sticker to see how many people can fit, you feel the gears grind to a jerky halt between floors. Picture yourself trying to stay objective and hopeful while longing to be rescued. In that same sense, Jesus encouraged the disciples as they considered the dark days ahead. Even though the future held many dangers, Jesus’s words prepared them to remain hopeful and watchful through the pain. **NH**



POINT TO PONDER

Pain and suffering are normal and expected features of serving God in a broken world.

FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Meditate over the following verse this week: “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

PRAYER POINT

“Dear God of the beginning and the end, may I live with Jesus’s mindset. May I remember that I am a pilgrim passing through this pain filled earth and that glory follows suffering!”

THE KEEPER OF THE DOOR

Jesus continued to shatter the disciples' expectations with His explanation of end times events (Matthew 24-25). After He shared church age realities like wars and false messiahs, Jesus prophesied persecution and suffering as they carried out a gospel ministry. He encouraged them to keep watching for His return through it all.

Jesus then addressed the first question the disciples asked about the destruction of Jerusalem and their cherished temple. Jesus proclaimed that when armies surrounded Jerusalem, they should stay away and warn those inside the city to flee to the countryside. He promised gentiles would overrun the city and inflict horrific

punishment on God's people. Jesus prophesied the complete destruction of Jerusalem and the enslavement of its people, comparing the devastation to being "trampled" by gentiles (Luke 21:20-24). The disciples must have been heartsick envisioning the cruel destruction of their beloved city sprawled out 300 feet below.

Just like you and I reel from devastating news and desperately seek to adjust, the disciples searched for the right perspective in a shadowy, uncertain future. Jesus taught another parable to illustrate what God's people should do between the "already" of their salvation and the "not yet" of the end of an age:

MARK 13:33-37

33"Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time will come. 34"It is like a man away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. 35"Therefore, be on the alert—for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— 36in case he should come suddenly and find you asleep. 37"What I say to you I say to all, 'Be on the alert!'"

In this parable, Jesus rehearses a common theme. The owner of a house left for an unspecified amount of time. He put slaves in charge and appointed a doorkeeper. He gave them individual responsibilities that contributed to the smooth operation of his household. He told the doorkeeper to, "be on the alert" and be ready for the imminent and unannounced return of the master. The slaves understood that the master planned to demand an account of the labor and resources the slaves expended in his absence. Slaves who had fallen asleep would hang their heads in shame at the return of the master.

Consider the following:

1 Soon after Jesus's death, signs began to point to the destruction of Jerusalem. The disciples watched as the Jews grew more rebellious and Rome became increasingly hostile. The Jews eventually rebelled against Rome in 66 AD. Inside the besieged city, the Jews quickly divided into three factions. These groups began to kill each other and destroy the other groups' food supplies. Despite weakening themselves through civil strife, they stubbornly maintained control of Jerusalem until 70 AD. When the Roman general and future

emperor Titus arrived to besiege the city. He spent 4 months building siege ramps which he used to storm the city and destroy the temple. The great General Titus exclaimed after the historic victory, "Surely God was with us in the war, who brought the Jews down from these strongholds, for what could hand or engine do against these towers?"¹ While Titus marveled at the strength of the city, his soldiers began categorizing God's people. They kept many strong, young men, some of the women and children, and slaughtered the rest. The Romans killed over one million inhabitants of Israel and took approximately 97,000 captive. For months afterwards, the Romans amused themselves by parading Jewish prisoners through their cities and by pitting them against battle-hardened Roman soldiers in gladiatorial games. Wild animals devoured thousands more in coliseums and arenas. Still others died from torture, enslavement, and starvation. What a tragedy!

2 Josephus, a Jewish historian, gave a graphic account of the Roman siege and final destruction of the temple and

city in 70 AD. He wrote, "While the temple was in flames, the victors stole everything they could lay their hands on, and slaughtered all who were caught. No pity was shown to age or rank, old men or children or laity or priests- all were massacred...the ground was hidden by corpses and the soldiers had to climb over heaps of bodies in pursuit of the fugitives...pouring into the streets [of the upper city] they [Roman soldiers] massacred everyone they found, burning the houses with all who had taken shelter in them. So great was the slaughter that in many places the flames were put out by streams of blood...when dawn broke all Jerusalem was in flames."²

Jesus kindly offered citizenship in His eternal kingdom. Instead, they denied His deity, assigned His miracles to Satan, chose self-rule, and perished tragically. God has set human history on a collision course with His judgement. As chaos swirls around us, we should watchfully anticipate His imminent return. He will reward us for faithful service and destroy those who reject His offer of salvation. **NH**

POINT TO PONDER

God's promises will surely come to pass. He will reward what He deems good and destroy what He regards as evil.

FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Look out the window and tell yourself, "Jesus could be here any minute". Then work to prioritize getting your heart and "house" ready for His arrival. Ask the Spirit of God to help you sort through areas of your life that are not ready for His return.

PRAYER POINT

"Dear God of sure judgement, You are patient, longsuffering, and just. Your justice requires that no sin go unpaid for. Help me to ready myself for your return."

FAITHFUL VS EVIL SERVANT

After Jesus shared the disturbing signs for the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, He proceeded to answer the disciples' second question about His return by shifting the focus of His Olivet Discourse to The Great Tribulation. Jesus spoke of three ages as He answered the disciple's questions. The first age covered the time between His death and the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Second, Jesus briefly alluded to the church age which will end with the rapture of the church. Finally, Jesus wanted His listeners to know about the Great Tribulation that will culminate in His second coming.

Many Bible scholars believe that the church will escape the wrath of the Tribulation through an event called the "rapture". Jesus promised to come back for His church and to "receive" them so that they would join Him in heaven (John 14:1-3). Paul reiterated the rapture program to the Thessalonians when he described the experience of believers being "caught up" together with believers who have fallen "asleep" to meet

the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Jesus also gave the example of an unbeliever and a believer doing everyday activities like working in a field together when suddenly the believer vanishes or is raptured (Matthew 24:36-41). Jesus warned that during the first half of the seven-year Great Tribulation false prophets will usher in a worldwide religion and unrestrained evil will grip the earth (Matthew 24:9-14). The second half of the tribulation will begin with the "abomination of desolation" in which the Antichrist will defile the rebuilt temple. The tribulation suffering described by Jesus will be unparalleled in human history. During the tribulation, the false religion of the Antichrist will drive a wedge into the Jewish community. Many Jews will repent and embrace God's program of redemption. This believing remnant will face intense persecution. Other Jews will embrace the religion of the Antichrist. Jesus addressed these two groups with the following parable:

MATTHEW 24:42-51

42"Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. 43"But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. 44"For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will. 45"Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? 46"Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. 47"Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. 48"But if that evil slave says in his heart, 'My master is not coming for a long time,' 49and begins to beat his fellow slaves and eat and drink with drunkards; 50the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, 51and will cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

42"Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. 43"But be sure of

The two types of slaves will become evident when the master returns from his time away. Some slaves will exhibit

complacent behaviors while others will make faithful choices. The unanswered question is, "Who then is the faithful and

sensible slave...?” The slave found working diligently when the master returns will receive the master’s praise, yet the master will cast lazy, distracted slaves into outer darkness.

Consider the following:

1 God designated three purposes for the Great Tribulation.¹ To do away with wickedness (Isaiah 13:9), bring about a worldwide revival (Revelation 7:1-4), and to break the stubborn will of the Jewish people (Daniel 12:5-7).

During the first three and a half years of the tribulation, God will unleash His punitive wrath on mankind and the earth. Mankind will beg the rocks to fall on them to end their misery. Hail, fire, darkness, and water which turns to blood will torment the people of the earth. Even while 144,000 witnesses (believing Jews) will help usher in a worldwide revival, the Antichrist will rise. The second half of the Great Tribulation will bring the forced worship of the Antichrist, the infamous mark of the beast and relentless persecution of those who refuse to worship him. Jesus will return at the end of the tribulation period to determine who served Him faithfully and who did not.

2 The time-tested character of God serves as the most powerful argument in favor of church-age believers not enduring the torment of the tribulation. When God poured out His wrath on the people of Noah’s time, He hid His people in the ark. When He unleashed His fury on Egypt, He tenderly sheltered His people in Goshen. When Titus destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD, not one believer died because God had warned them to flee.² God is the same yesterday, today and forever. While God allows His people to suffer at the hands of godless men, He reserves His punitive fury for unbelieving mankind. Instead, He will gather us under His wings by means of the rapture and we will weather the storm of the Great Tribulation safely in His care.

Jesus used this parable to send a message to God’s people who will be living during the Great Tribulation period. He encouraged them to be watchful and serve Him faithfully like a dutiful caretaker of an important household. Those who reject the Antichrist and trust in Christ will be deemed faithful at the second coming of Christ. Jesus will accept this remnant into the Millennial kingdom they initially rejected while He condemns the “faithless” worshippers of the Antichrist to an eternity in Hell.³

POINT TO PONDER

Our hearts cry out for fairness when we are wronged. God’s character demands justice for sin.

FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Ponder the future of mankind. Ask the Spirit of God to teach you how to live with an appropriate awareness of these end times realities. Thank God for His protection while you lovingly warn unbelievers of the judgment to come.

PRAYER POINT

“Dear God of love and judgement, You righted all wrongs with the blood of Your Son. Those of us who accepted it by faith are shielded from Your wrath. You will punish those who refuse Your forgiveness for all of eternity. I pray that I will encourage unbelievers to change their minds about You and that I will gently remind Your people to live ready for Your return.”

THE TEN VIRGINS AND TEN TALENTS

As Tuesday evening of Passover week wore on, Jesus remained atop the Mount of Olives foretelling the events that would take place from the time of the disciples until the millennial reign of Christ. During His message, Jesus gave the signs for the destruction of Jerusalem, the signs for the end of the church age, and the proper perspective for believing Jews

during the Great Tribulation. The disciples also heard the sobering news that “faithless” Jews would be excluded from the millennial kingdom.¹ Jesus used the following two parables to clearly explain the basis on which the Jews would be excluded from the millennial kingdom at the end of the Tribulation:

MATTHEW 25:1-30

1“Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2“Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. 3“For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, 4but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. 5“Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. 6“But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ 7“Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. 8“The foolish said to the prudent, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9“But the prudent answered, ‘No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ 10“And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. 11“Later the other virgins also came, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open up for us.’ 12“But he answered, ‘Truly I say to you, I do not know you.’ 13“Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.

14“For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. 15“To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. 16“Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. 17“In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. 18“But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

19“Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20“The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents.’ 21“His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’

22“Also the one who had received the two talents came up and said, ‘Master, you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents.’ 23“His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’

24“And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. 25‘And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.’

26“But his master answered and said to him, ‘You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. 27“Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. 28“Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.’

29“For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. 30“Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We must read these parables keeping the original audience in mind. In the parable of The Faithful Servants, Jesus spoke about excluding unfaithful Israelites from the millennial kingdom at the end of the Great Tribulation. In these two key parables, Jesus teaches the importance of preparedness and faithfulness.

Consider the following:

1 In ancient Israel, a bride waited at her home until the groom arrived to escort her to the ceremony. The groom, along with a festive group of friends and relatives, paraded her through the streets until arriving at the prepared home of the groom. Unmarried friends of the bride, known as virgins, met the couple as they approached the wedding location. In this case, the bride arrived after dark. The guests would have been required to use lamps to see the bride. The virgins without oil were unable to greet the couple and the host shut them out

of the wedding banquet.

2 In the parable of the talents, the wealthy man gave incredible sums of money to the servants. A talent (60 lbs.) of silver, for example, was very valuable in their world. The faithful servants doubled the master’s investment while the fearful servant hid his talent in the ground. The master took away the unfaithful servant’s talent and gave it to the faithful servant. The faithless servant was then banished to outer darkness.

Jesus communicated this message: God will judge Jewish people in the Great Tribulation based on their level of preparedness and faithfulness. They will have an opportunity to declare loyalty to the Antichrist or to Jehovah God. Those who are found prepared “with oil” and faithfully “investing” in God’s purposes will be found worthy of God’s kingdom. The faithless will be cast into outer darkness when Jesus returns at the end of the Great Tribulation. **NH**

POINT TO PONDER

The choices I make today dictate the consequences I will face tomorrow.

FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Ask the Spirit of God to help you make choices that you won’t regret in eternity.

PRAYER POINT

“Dear God of righteous judgment, may each day be filled with wise investments in eternity and may my choices be an indication of my readiness to be ushered into Your presence.”

THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS

Our Lord Jesus appeared on the world's scene as the messianic king of Israel. God's people had languished for centuries under the iron-fisted rule of political and spiritual oppressors. At the time of Jesus, Rome was overpowering Israel politically and the Pharisees were torturing His people spiritually with punishing man-made laws and empty rituals. Jesus graciously offered the Jews citizenship in His kingdom. He invited them close to enjoy a lavish banquet table filled with spiritual blessings. He offered them the free gift of righteousness apart from works (John 3:16).

The religious leaders bitterly rejected God's gracious overtures and attributed

Jesus's miracles to Satan. As a response to their rejection, Jesus withdrew the offer of His kingdom to that generation and He took on the role of prophet. Jesus prophetically foretold a time of great tribulation during which believers in Him would form a community. The disciples wrestled to understand what would become of the gentiles who would survive this tribulation. They could not fathom on what basis these gentiles would be judged worthy to enter the messianic kingdom. Jesus addressed this tension and ended the Olivet Discourse with the following parable:

MATTHEW 25:31-46 31“**B**ut when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. 32“**A**ll the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; 33**a**nd He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.

34“**T**hen the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35‘**F**or I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; 36**n**aked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’ 37“**T**hen the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? 38‘**A**nd when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 39‘**W**hen did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ 40“**T**he King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’

41“**T**hen He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; 42**f**or I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; 43**I** was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.’ 44“**T**hen they themselves also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?’ 45“**T**hen He will answer them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ 46“**T**hese will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

The parable described a scene in which Jesus gathered all the gentile nations before Him at the end of the Tribulation. He sorted them into two groups. He gathered the “sheep” on his right and welcomed them into His kingdom. Jesus praised them for attending to His needs by nurturing His brethren during imprisonment. In contrast, Jesus cursed the “goats” for ignoring Him and for not taking care of His desperate needs. Jesus then dismissed the unrighteous goats into eternal punishment and invited the sheep into eternal life.

Consider the following:

1 The Olivet Discourse is “the most detailed teaching that the messiah gave concerning future things”¹ because “it answered the question: when and how would the messianic kingdom come into being? ... Immediately after the Olivet Discourse preparations were made for the last Passover and the first Lord’s Supper.”² Jesus arrived in Jerusalem as king but transitioned to prophet after being rejected by His people. After delivering this discourse, Jesus began to fulfill His role as high priest by readying Himself to spill His innocent blood and take it into the presence of God to atone for our sin.

2 God will resume His program with Israel during the tribulation. A faithful Jewish remnant, beginning with 144,000 witnesses, will bring about a worldwide revival. Jewish scholar Arnold Fruchtenbaum notes that, “...Jews are scattered all over the world. All of this world’s major languages are spoken by some Jews somewhere.”³ Once again salvation will be announced by the Jewish people.

This parable described the judgement of the gentiles at the end of the tribulation. Gentiles who embraced the religion of the Antichrist indicated their choice by rejecting the gospel of the kingdom and ignoring the needs of God’s people. Jesus dismissed these “goats” into everlasting punishment. Gentiles who believed the gospel of the kingdom showed evidence of faith by supporting the believing Jewish community and sharing in their persecution. These gentile “sheep” will sit at Jesus’s feet and hear these words, “Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34). **NH**

POINT TO PONDER

Living disconnected from God’s reality and ignorant of His revelation will end disastrously.

FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

God’s Word defines reality. To go deeper, invest in a good study Bible and read it daily.

PRAYER POINT

“Dear God of Heaven and Earth, Thank You for Your parables that opened my mind and heart to the kingdom teaching of my Lord Jesus. May I imitate Him in all I say and do. May His yielded life become the righteous standard of my behavior. May I live like He will return any minute and bring me home with Him.”

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