

BOOK 2

# PARABLES

The Stories of Jesus

A NEW HOPE DEVOTIONAL **BIBLE STUDY**

## INTRODUCTION

Jesus came to serve as King and Savior. Unfortunately, the Jewish religious leadership formed opinions about Jesus based on cultural ideas of a kingdom instead of heavenly ones. A few men and women, like Joseph and Mary, humbly submitted to His rule over their lives while the vast majority hard-heartedly rejected Him. Jesus responded to this rejection with strong emotion. He wept over Jerusalem and prophesied a horrific time of destruction for the city (Luke 19:41-44). But God's heart didn't change – He loves us and pursues our hearts with a loving alternative to self-rule.

You will note in this second devotional that Jesus shifts His focus. In the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the emphasis was on the Jews accepting His earthly rule. Jesus begins to refer to a time in which Jews and Gentiles form a new entity called The Church. Scholars refer to this time as the Age of Christendom. This was an entirely new concept for the disciples. Jesus spent an entire day teaching nine parables to explain the spiritual qualities of our time.

My heart for you is revealed in the Points to Ponder and Prayer Points at the end of each lesson. These were inspired by lessons my wife Rae and I have learned together in life and ministry. My son, Ric Bruce III, acted as editor-in-chief. Katie Scott, missionary to Haiti, painstakingly proof-read 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 The Parables of Jesus.

As a staff at New Hope, we have enjoyed every minute dedicated to creating these lessons. The spiritual camaraderie we have experienced as a staff has been worshipful. My sincere prayer is that we, like Joseph and Mary, may humbly accept the responsibilities and privileges of God's rule in every area of our lives. Welcome to The Parables of Jesus, Book Two.

Blessings,



Rich Bruce  
Discipleship Pastor

**NEW HOPE CHURCH**

2170 E. SAGINAW HWY | EAST LANSING, MI 48823 | [NHCHURCH.COM](http://NHCHURCH.COM)

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## RECOMMENDED REVIEW

**W**e have reached a critical juncture in the life of Jesus. After the Jewish leadership assigned the power behind Jesus's miracles to Satan, Jesus began revealing the characteristics of the time following His impending death. Please read the following as a quick review before beginning the next set of parables.

**1** Jesus used parables to transfer reality from the throne room of God to the world of humans. What is "real" in God's presence needs to be real for us. What is true there needs to be functionally true here, what manhood is there needs to be manhood here, etc. In the parable of the potter and the clay, for example, the children of Israel were confused about God's actions. God allowed Nebuchadnezzar to destroy Judah as a punishment for their idolatrous behavior. Nebuchadnezzar cruelly annihilated family members and neighboring towns. This prompted Israel to question God's right to act. Jeremiah used the parable of a potter exercising his will over a lump of clay to demonstrate God's authority and right to act. God had every right to punish Israel for violating the covenant agreement He made with them, just like a potter rejects a flawed project. Bible teacher and author Dennis McCallum says, "It's the judgment of God that makes the grace of God matter."<sup>1</sup> He is preeminent in His throne room, and it is our choice to make Him the king of our existence.

**2** Parables present unique challenges because they are "narrative in form with a figurative meaning."<sup>2</sup> Our cultural bias tempts us to allegorize the parables. Early church theologians concocted extravagant interpretations of parables by assigning meaning to every element of a parable. For example, Origen (an early church leader) believed that the donkey bearing the wounded man in the parable of the Good Samaritan was the body of Christ bearing

our sins. As interpreters of the parables, we must look for the singular tension point that the parable was addressing. For example, take the authority "figure" of the potter. God, as represented by the potter, has absolute authority over His people. After interpreting the central meaning, we could apply the parable as God authoritatively shaping us into His image. In this way, we interpret the parable before applying it.

**3** Jesus came to offer and to clarify God's kingdom program to the Jews. This yet-future kingdom involved the re-establishment of God's rule on earth which once existed in the Garden of Eden. When the religious leaders heard Jesus speak of a kingdom, they expected a heavenly king to play along with their earthly expectations. What they felt became reality for them. Sound familiar?

**4** One of the sticking points for the Pharisees was the source of kingdom required righteousness. All religions require righteous effort to gain the approval of their deity. The Sermon on the Mount addressed this idea for the crowds. Jesus challenged the crowd with the bold claim that their righteousness had to exceed the maniacal legalism of the Pharisees in order to enter God's kingdom. The very idea that a commoner's righteousness could exceed that of the religious elite was a mind bender for the people. In God's kingdom, righteousness must be gifted to undeserving recipients and not earned (John 3:16). The Pharisees defended their system of earning God's favor with fanatical devotion.

**5** In Genesis 12-17, God promised Abraham a land, an eternal legacy, and a great nation. God swore that Israel would bless all the other nations. Jesus arrived on the scene to establish a literal kingdom that would fulfill these promises. He fulfilled all the requirements of the

long-awaited Jewish king. Tragically, He was rejected by the Jewish leaders even though He fulfilled very specific messianic prophecies.

**6** Jesus convincingly fulfilled all the biblical expectations of messiah, and yet the Jewish religious leaders rejected Jesus. Worse than that, they assigned the miracles that proved Jesus's identity to Satan, committing the unpardonable sin. Mark Bailey explained it this way, "Three obstacles to the effective appropriation of the message of the Kingdom include Satanic activity, external pressure from those unsympathetic to God's purposes, and the lack of internal spirituality within the hearers themselves."<sup>3</sup> While the callous rejection of Jesus by the Pharisees is appalling, it mirrors times when we have exchanged God's rule for self-rule.

**7** This next point is critical to understanding the next set of parables. After the Pharisees rejected King Jesus, Jesus withdrew the kingdom offer from that generation. God tempered His kingdom program and Jesus began teaching principles of a mystery kingdom in which we now live. This time period, referred to as "Christendom," will extend until the return of Christ. When Jesus returns, He will establish God's rule on earth in the millennial kingdom.

**8** Imagine the crowds. They initially clamored after Jesus with high expectations. They would sit for hours and listen to Him teach. In the beginning, Jesus taught the crowd with clear language. After the Jewish leaders committed the unpardonable sin, Jesus taught the crowds in parables. The next nine parables begin to speak of a mystery kingdom - a time like no other. The good news of this mystery kingdom will be sown like seed by human agents. The seed will have life of its own and will not need outside help to grow. Weeds that look just like wheat will grow up among the true stalks. The weeds will be gathered and burned. Confused? Welcome to The Parables: The Stories of Jesus, part two.

I pray that you are eagerly anticipating studying this next set of parables. God has some awesome applications in store for us. We now inhabit this mystery kingdom called Christendom. This new identity confers both mind-blowing privileges and awesome responsibilities. God adopted us in His Son and Jesus is now our brother. Our human default is to love the privileges and shirk the responsibilities. My sincere prayer is that the reality in God's throne room may become our reality. He communicated it well. Ours is to learn, love, worship and pray in His Spirit and truth. **NH**



## THE SOWER, THE SEED AND THE SOILS

**O**n the very day that Jesus healed the blind man, was rejected by his family, and indicted the Pharisees for blaspheming the Holy Spirit, He entered a boat and taught the people.<sup>1</sup> The shoreline was a common venue used by Jesus. The water kept the crowds at bay while providing natural amplification for His voice.

His first parable about the Sower serves as a summary for the entire sermon. Try to envision Jesus standing in the boat and tirelessly “sowing seed”. The willingness of the crowd to hear His message will depend largely on the “soil conditions” of their hearts.

**Consider this next parable:**

**MATTHEW 13:3–23** And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, “Behold, the sower went out to sow; 4 and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. 7 Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. 8 And others fell on the good soil and \*yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. 9 He who has ears, let him hear.”

10 And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” 11 Jesus answered them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. 12 For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. 13 Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 14 In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, ‘You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; You will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; 15 For the heart of this people has become dull, With their ears they scarcely hear, And they have closed their eyes, Otherwise they would see with their eyes, Hear with their ears, And understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them.’

16 But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. 17 For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

18 “Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. 20 The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. 22 And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. 23 And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.”

**T**he official rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leadership and the crediting of His miracles to Satan had a thinning effect on the crowds. Those who remained pressed into one another and up against the water's edge, anticipating the clear teaching and sharp jabs Jesus would deliver to the religious leaders of the day. Jesus always spoke the words of God clearly, concisely, and powerfully.

A hush falls over a crowd as Jesus prepares to teach from the boat. They wait with great anticipation. *What will He say? What will He do?* Finally, the moment arrives when the rabbi will wow the crowds with His rhetoric. He opens His mouth and tells a dreary story about a guy throwing seed on the ground. He pauses and the crowd gives each other a "what was that?" look. While they murmur, the disciples ask Jesus, "What are you doing teaching the crowds in parables?" (Verse 10.)

#### **Consider the following:**

**1** Jesus replied to the disciples with two reasons for teaching the crowds in parables. The first was that He desired to conceal truth from hard hearted hearers. He did not do this to punish the people but to illustrate that spiritual discernment must be gifted to a prepared hearer. God's truth cannot be discovered by human effort. Second, Jesus spoke in parables to fulfill prophecy. Jesus quotes Isaiah 6. In this chapter of Isaiah, Isaiah's tongue had just been cleansed by the Seraph. After this cleansing, Isaiah was then ceremonially ready to address the people. Isaiah mistakenly thought that the entire nation may repent and be cleansed. However, in verses 9-10, God prophesies the people will harden their hearts. Jesus seems to be saying that in the same way God's people hardened their heart during Isaiah's time, the crowds will reject Jesus and harden their hearts. The disciples would have heard this message as an ominous sign of future trouble for themselves and for the nation.

**2** In the ancient world, farmers sowed their seed by expertly throwing handfuls of seed onto the ground. Farmers would clear a field and prepare it for planting. The soil would appear uniform and ready. Plowing was done after planting in order to work the seed into the soil, making it impossible to know where rocks were hidden in the ground. Today, we sow grass seed using a similar technique.

A normal return for non-hybrid wheat seed in the ancient world would have been tenfold. Jesus exaggerated the potential return when he talked of a potential return of hundred-fold. He likely overstated the yield to identify this as a parable. The promise of a plentiful harvest should inspire our evangelistic efforts.

Jesus astounds us with a detailed interpretation of the parable. He even assigns allegorical meaning to different parts of the story. We avoid this allegorical style of interpretation, but the Spirit of God has that privilege!

**3** In the parable, Jesus is the sower and, throughout the age of Christendom, His people will sow gospel seed. The parable affirms both the integrity of the seed and the capacity of the sower. It is the condition of the heart soil of the hearer that determines the response and the resulting fruit produced. Jesus said that some of the gospel seed fell on the footpath bordering the field. Since the path would not be tilled, the seed could be easily snatched away by Satan the schemer. Other seed fell on rocky ground. Jesus likens this thin soil layer to a lack of depth in God's Word where fresh gospel seedlings cannot put down roots. This weakened condition makes this type of hearer unwilling to believe God when tried and tested. The seed that falls among thorns represents the hearer that allows the cares of this life to choke out the effect of God's Word. This hearer is like Judas who lived with Jesus, heard His Words and then betrayed Him for money.

The good soil represents the listener that hears and understands the Word. “The word ‘hear’ is used thirteen times in Matthew 13:13-23. It is used in the same sense that God “hears” prayer. The Greek work implies active listening—Since God

is hearing prayer, He is acting on it.<sup>2</sup> In that same sense, the “good soil” hearer in this passage is also doing the work of the sweat soaked sower. He hears God’s Word, does the hard work of imitating the sower, and then enjoys the promised bountiful harvest.

**NH**



### POINT TO PONDER

A lawyer arguing to make a point in a courtroom is not a good analogy for sharing the good news of Christ. Jesus said sharing Christ is like a hard-working farmer generously throwing out seed on prepared soil. Wow. That changes everything.

### FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Look for seed sowing opportunities this week. You can start gospel conversations with friends, neighbors and family members. Ask them their view on creation, share what Christ has done in your life, or ask them to attend church with you.

### PRAYER POINT

“Dear Gardener God, thank you for sending your Son to sow gospel seed to the world. May I imitate His convinced belief, eternal perspective and seed sowing activities.”



## THE NATURE OF THE SEED

**A**fter interpreting the parable of the Sower for his disciples, Jesus continued his sermon from the boat. The disciples must have noted a dramatic shift in Jesus's teaching. In their early ministry with Him, the crowds had heard Jesus clearly urging the people to repent and embrace the messianic kingdom. Now, after the rejection of the Jewish leaders, He is preparing His listeners for a unexpected facet of God's rule on earth called Christendom that was not spoken of in the Old Testament. The core focus of this new program continues to be lost people who need to hear the gospel. God chose earthly seed as a metaphor to describe the characteristics of this Heavenly good news.

Read the following parable to learn why seed is a fitting illustration for the good news of the mystery kingdom. Jesus draws some fascinating analogies between seeds and the gospel in this masterful parable. The disciples would have understood that they would be the sowers in the last parable and God's Word is the seed. Now Jesus will set the tone for spreading the gospel by assuring them that human interference is not needed once the seed is sown on prepared soil. Carefully observe the actions of the sower and the independent spontaneity of the seeds' development in the following parable.

**MARK 4:26-29** 26 And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; 27 and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows—how, he himself does not know. 28 The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. 29 But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

**I**magine that we lived 2000 years ago. Scientific knowledge was in its infancy. We might have struggled to understand how a seed sprouted and produced another seed-bearing plant. Mankind learned through trial and error the importance of soil conditions and water, but the germination process and cell division would have been a complete mystery. We might have picked up a seed, deliberated over it and then mused to ourselves in ignorance, "How can a whole tree fit in this little thing?"

### Consider the following:

**1** The creation story of Genesis records, "Then God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation: plants yielding seed, [and] fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them"; and it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants

yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit with seed in them, after their kind; and God saw that it was good." (Genesis 1:11,12) When God created plants, He designed a seed to house a veritable universe within. The pollination process assures that the ovule of the plant is fertilized which creates a plant embryo within the seed. The outer shell protects and shelters the fragile, life-giving components within. For germination to take place, certain climatic conditions must be met. Cellular metabolism will lay dormant until water is available. As soon as moisture and warmth are present, the resulting humidity ensures enough moisture for the plant. Enzymes are then activated to encourage cell division which induces the embryonic plant to use the food stored within the seed. A primary root develops from the seed and

begins to extract moisture and nutrients from the soil. Next, the embryo uses these nutrients to form a shoot. The shoot reaches for the photosynthetic sky while the root reaches deeper into the nutrient rich soil.<sup>1</sup>

**2** The One who spoke seed into existence uses seed as a metaphor to describe the nature of His message of redemption. Humans spread the “seed”, but the germination process is accomplished apart from human intervention. The sweat-soaked farmer carefully prepares the soil for the seed. He takes seed that could be consumed for food and he spreads it over the ground in faith. He goes to sleep at night with no guarantee of the results. The seed sprouts from life within the seed itself. It grows mysteriously until its shoots are observed reaching for the sun. When the fruit ripens, the sower delights over the fruit of his labor.

This lesson makes me think of missionaries on college campuses around the country. These individuals tirelessly sow gospel seed by unashamedly starting Bible studies in dorms, meeting with individuals, and through hosting gospel events. Many students hear the good news of Christ. Some students harden their hearts and become unreceptive like the seed that fell on the road and was eaten by birds. Other

students express an initial interest in the gospel but, like the shallow soil in the last parable, the seed sprouts and cannot take root. For some, worldly cares (thorns and weeds,) choke out initial interest in the gospel. Still others receive the Word with joy, express saving faith in Jesus, and go on to bear second generation fruit for God.

Imagine picking up a college business textbook, flipping to a random page and reading, “This is how you start a business. You throw out some advertising seed money and your business grows through the advertising message while you spectate. All that is needed for your business to grow is found within your word of advertising.” This ridiculous thought illustrates that God’s good news is like no human endeavor. The Apostle Paul said, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16). The power is found within the seed. This fact should inspire us to confidently sow gospel seeds like our missionary brothers and sisters around the world. The potential for growth lies within the seed itself and not feeble human efforts. Let us humbly proclaim the good news this week! **NH**

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## POINT TO PONDER

My responsibility is to faithfully sow seed, but God alone grows the living gospel in the hearts of those who hear the message.

## FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Good news! “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that **Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures**, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Meditate on the power that lies within this simple message.

## PRAYER POINT

“Dear seed growing God. My inclination is to adapt the message of the gospel to make it more pleasant for my audience. May I never forget that the power is within the gospel message and not in my ability to articulate it without offense.”

## DESTRUCTIVE WEEDS

Jesus continues His sermon from the boat. He tells a sobering parable about the activities of Satan through the end of the age. Historically, Satan has set out to kill, steal, and destroy the work of God. It should be no surprise that our age is

marked by the same kind of God-hating activity. The counterfeit plants in this parable are hauntingly like the true wheat. The difference is not detected until the “fruit” begins to appear. Read the following parable carefully, noting the nature of the weeds that are sown.

### MATTHEW 13:24-30; 37-43

Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field.<sup>25</sup> But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. <sup>26</sup> But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. <sup>27</sup> The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ <sup>28</sup> And he said to them, ‘An enemy has done this!’ The slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?’ <sup>29</sup> But he said, ‘No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. <sup>30</sup> Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.”’”

#### Jesus later explained the parable:

37 And He said, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, <sup>38</sup> and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one;<sup>39</sup> and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. <sup>40</sup> So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age.<sup>41</sup> The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness,<sup>42</sup> and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup> Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.”

**W**eeds called Darnel (Greek *Zizania*) appeared identical to a stalk of wheat. Sowing Darnel alongside wheat stalks constituted an almost unthinkable crime. This would have created stunted growth for the wheat, difficulty for the reapers, and an

air of humiliation around bringing in the crop. You would only do this to someone you hated. It would have meant intense suffering for the owner of the field and hunger for his family.

**Consider the following features of this parable:**

**1** Jesus makes four points in this parable. First, the enemy cruelly “counter-sowed” a false crop to create chaos and suffering, cancelling out the farmer’s hard work. Second, two different types of stalks emerged that appeared identical to each other. Note that each type of sowing produced results, but only one of them produced genuine fruit. Third, the reapers at the end of the harvest would determine the identity of the stalks and burn the counterfeit crop. Finally, the presence of fruit on the stalk positively identified the stalk as genuine. By the same token, a lack of fruit identified the counterfeit stalks.<sup>1</sup>

**2** Jesus interprets this parable for us. The sower and the good seed describes Jesus strategically placing His people (the sons of the kingdom) around the world for maximum gospel effect. The counter-sower is Satan, who places his minions strategically among the true gospel workers. Satan’s representatives frustrate the true work of God by appearing identical while bearing no worthwhile fruit. Angels will gather the harvest at the end of the age and the false workers will endure eternal hellfire.

**3** Helmut Thielicke writes, “After we read this parable, we can hardly slip into the misconception of a happy ending for

church history. For this parable speaks of a dark menace, a mysterious power that is everywhere at work-and not only out there among the [fringes] of civilization, the politicians and the executives, the [masked actors] and the Mardi Gras, and the movies but also in the innermost sanctuary itself. In this very moment in which the Word of God sounds from the pulpit that sinister power is also sowing its toxic seed among the furrows.”<sup>2</sup> God’s people must be aware of the potential for deceptions originating not only from our sinful hearts, but also from a world dominated by Satanic philosophies.

Satan’s lies eerily resemble God’s truth. God offers the free gift of salvation while Satan entices mankind with the tantalizing lie of earning salvation through good works. God designed our being to find satisfaction and joy in delayed gratification while Satan whispers, “Do what feels good.” God created us for dependence on, fellowship with, and obedience to Him. Satan whispers instead, “You’ve got this. You don’t need God.” God desires that we live to His original creation ideals for marriage, gender roles, etc; but Satan’s cronies label a person with correct belief a “judgy hypocrite”. In the parable, these philosophies are propagated through strategically placed prophets of wrong thinking. Welcome to the last days. **NH**

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## POINT TO PONDER

Who do you invite to whisper into your soul? God’s truth-tellers or Satan’s minions?

## FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Look for the subtle lies of Satan in media, false religions, and in your own heart. For example, when we believe that good works can earn us favor with God, we are believing the deceptions of Satan. Reflect on truths like your secure identity in Christ (Galatians 4:4-5) that dispel Satan’s lies.

## PRAYER POINT

“Dear Truth-telling God. All my soul needs is Your Word. May I study it with diligence to discern Your good from his evil.”

## THE MUSTARD SEED AND THE YEAST

Jesus continued to reveal God's heart as He spoke to the crowds from the boat. He carefully prepared his listeners for the coming age. He had explained that this new aspect of his rule (Christendom) would be marked by the spreading of good news (or gospel). His laborers would generously circulate the news like wheat seed sown in the ancient world. Well prepared "soil"

would receive this news gladly. In poorly prepared soil, however, germination would be choked out by the Satan's counter-sowing and the cares of this world.

In the next breath, Jesus explains the growth characteristics of this new movement as He unexpectedly compares God's kingdom to two tiny, insignificant things: mustard seeds and yeast.

# MATTHEW 13:31-35

### The Mustard Seed

He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; 32 and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."

### The Leaven

33 He spoke another parable to them, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened."

34 All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable. 35 This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world."

Mustard seed and yeast have interesting parallels. They both begin their work in obscurity and eventually grow exponentially larger.

### Consider the following points about these parables:

1 Since Jesus' day, modern science has discovered varieties of seeds much smaller than the mustard seed. This has led some to doubt the divinity of Jesus. If He were really God, they say, He wouldn't have claimed that the mustard seed was the smallest seed in existence. Biblical scholars reconcile this seeming contradiction quite

easily. Jesus spoke that day to simple farmers, not to modern day biologists. The mustard seed was the smallest seed known to the farmers He was addressing. The mustard plant can grow 15-20 feet in a single season, and the plants grow large enough for adult birds to perch in. Grassroots efforts within Christendom will begin small like a mustard seed and grow to become an influential movement with a global impact.

2 The baking of bread was a daily occurrence in the ancient world. Yeast was not added from a cake of yeast, rather from a lump of prepared, unbaked

dough that had been set aside for the next day's bread. When dough was being prepared the following day, the unbaked lump of yeasty dough was added to the mixture. The small lump of dough that would seem to feed only one person would grow to a loaf of baked bread that fed several people. More specifically, the amount of flour mentioned in the parable would feed 100 people.<sup>1</sup> Just like unseen yeast, a future gospel movement would one day grow to incorporate every corner of the planet.

**3** Christians comprise 1.7% of North Korea's population. The believers there face intense persecution. Christians face arrest, imprisonment, and even execution at the hands of an authoritarian regime. A recent news report highlighted two home churches in North Korea that have 4 people each. Church goers keep bibles hidden and arrange clandestine meetings to study, worship, and pray.<sup>2</sup> Without the encouragement of the parable of the yeast, we may look at these small churches and despair for their survival. These North Korean churches are a great example of gospel beginnings as small as mustard seeds and microscopic as yeast. Be encouraged!

The parable of the yeast and the mustard seed give us parameters for our expectations around gospel efforts and church movements. These truths encouraged the disciples as they proceeded from Jesus to take good news to some very dark places in the Greco-Roman world. The movement that began in obscurity in Jerusalem has grown to save the souls of millions around the world. Thank you, God. **NH**



## POINT TO PONDER

God's activities are often marked by humble, seemingly insignificant beginnings - a barn, a manger, the humble birth of our Savior.

## FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Don't be discouraged if the gospel seeds you've sown in the lives of others seem to have had little or no effect. Gospel seeds sprout in obscurity and begin to grow unnoticed. We do the sowing and God does the growing. Let's continue to sow the seed of the gospel generously this week!

## PRAYER POINT

Dear God of humble beginnings. Help me to recognize your work in my life. May I remember that, in your economy, things that appear small are not insignificant.

## HIDDEN TREASURE AND FINE PEARLS

**A**fter finishing His sermon on the boat, Jesus entered a house with His disciples. (Matthew 13:1). As an honored rabbi, Jesus held the rapt attention of the disciples and others listening in.

After interpreting the parable of the tares for them, Jesus continued to instruct the disciples by relating the following two parables. Try to imagine the disciples'

ongoing struggle to grasp previously unknown concepts, namely the ground rules for a future kingdom of God. Jesus described a seemingly unthinkable realm where the righteousness of God set the bar for every thought and behavior. The following parable highlights what seems to be a contradiction: God's kingdom will bring both unimaginable joy and painful sacrifice.

### MATTHEW 13:44-46

#### Hidden Treasure

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

#### A Costly Pearl

45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, 46 and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

**T**hese parables feature two men who found valuable treasure. One seemed to happen upon it by digging in a field, while the other seemed to intentionally embark on a painstaking quest to find a perfect pearl. Both men made discoveries so remarkable they sold everything they had to possess what they found.

#### Consider the following:

**1** Without a banking system in ancient Israel, people often buried treasure in the ground and kept its location secret. The Jews wrote stringent laws that dealt with "moveables" found on other's land. The laws prohibited a finder from "lifting" treasure found on land they did not own.<sup>1</sup> This explains why the finder covered the treasure back up and purchased the land at great

sacrifice. He was keeping the laws of the day.

In ancient Israel, fathers passed property down to their sons. Selling property under compulsion was considered deeply shameful. For ancient Jews, seeing a "for sale" sign in a family member's yard would be agonizing. Some commentators have suggested that the man in the parable is generously redeeming the land for a disadvantaged family member. This might help explain the finder's somewhat clandestine behavior.

**2** Pearls were highly valued in the Greco-Roman world of Jesus's time. The Jewish Talmudic writings spoke of pearls as "priceless," echoing widely held cultural sentiments. Pearl merchants scoured the earth for pearls that would

produce wide-eyed wonder. The best specimens were found in countries far from Israel. People considered it a high honor to simply hold and gaze upon a beautiful pearl.<sup>2</sup> Jesus compared life under God's rule to finding a priceless pearl. Jesus' analogy would have taken his original hearer's breath away.

When you interpret parables, look for things like repetition, contrasts, and concepts that receive careful attention. The interpretive "rule of end stress" reminds us to pay special attention to the final result of the parable.<sup>3</sup> In both parables, the main

characters discovered items so precious that everything else lost all meaning and significance. The discovered treasure prompted them to joyfully surrender everything that had been important to them before. Both parables focus on the sacrifice of two men whose outlook on life has been rocked to the core. Think for a moment of what it would take to make you sell every item you own. Your home, your photos, keepsakes, and even your pets. Does God's rule in your life mean that much to you? The men in the parables certainly thought so. **NH**



### POINT TO PONDER

Reflect honestly on the type of treasures you seek. Matthew 6:21 says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." NASB

### FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Think back over the past week and take a kingdom inventory. What percentage of your efforts were spent pursuing the things of God and what percentage were spent on non-eternal trivial pursuits? Let's be intentional and go treasure hunting for the things of God this week. Gaze on God's accomplishments with awestruck wonder.

### PRAYER POINT

Dear God of immeasurable treasure. May your kingdom be so precious to me that everything else loses significance. There is none like you.

## THE DRAGNET

**W**hat a day! Jesus healed a blind man, had his family reject him, and He taught the people on land and sea. He instructed them on the characteristics of the coming age using nine kingdom parables. We have covered seven so far in this study.

Jesus' original audience struggled to understand these parables. Today, we understand that during the last days the gospel will be scattered like a sower scatters seed. Responses will vary from hard heartedness to embracing the good news wholeheartedly by faith. The parable of the mustard seed taught us that gospel movements will begin small and grow increasingly visible and influential. Gospel

seed will not need outside help to grow since the power is contained within the seed. Satan's apostles will sow counter-truth claims (weeds) that look eerily similar to the true wheat. This will set up a judgment scenario that will separate unbelievers (weeds) from believers (true wheat).

Now Jesus's house sermon continues with the eighth kingdom parable about a dragnet. Remember, God created (and Jesus introduced) the kingdom of God in order to bring all things under His righteous rule. Read carefully as Jesus explains yet another characteristic of the age we live in and the impending doom for citizens of Satan's kingdom.

## MATTHEW 13:47-53

### A Dragnet

47 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; 48 and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away. 49 So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, 50 and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

**J**esus compared the offer given to mankind to live under God's rule to a net that is cast into the sea and dragged to shore. All are welcome but not all belong. Every creature must choose to accept or reject God's offer of righteous rule. Those found with God's righteousness will be considered worthy. Those found without God's righteousness will be given the privilege they so desperately desired: the rights of self-rule. In God's economy, this results in destruction.

### Consider the following about this parable:

**1** The 1986 discovery of the "Kineret" boat along the shore of the Sea of Galilee astounded researchers. Two brothers found it buried deep in the mud. Researchers dated the craft to the time of Jesus. At 23 feet long, 7 feet wide and 4 feet deep, a boat this size could have easily accommodated 15 people. Ancient carpenters constructed it primarily out of cedar and oak<sup>1</sup> by attaching boards to a frame

with wooden pegs and iron nails. Prior to this discovery, scholars doubted whether biblical claims about boats could be accurate. Researchers even confirmed a hollow in the stern where someone like Jesus could sleep on a cushion during a storm (Mark 4:38-40).

**2** The disciples would have seen dragnets (*seine* in Greek) affixed between two boats, pulling a catch to shore. Perhaps they used this distinctive type of net themselves occasionally by attaching weights to the bottom of their nets and buoys to the top. After they pulled the nets to shore, they would have sorted the catch into two piles. Biblical law stipulated that the Jews could only consume sea creatures with scales and fins (see Lev. 11:10). The disciples left all “unclean” sea creatures such as crustaceans and mollusk shellfish without fins and scales in a pile on the beach to rot. The disciples would have carefully packed all “clean” fish into containers for transportation to Galilean markets.

Even a casual reader of the Bible is often astonished at the continual theme of God’s punishing fury throughout Scripture. In many ways, this fear is both natural and healthy. Throughout biblical history, whenever God’s people forget the judgment of God, that age has coincided with rebellious

apostasy (periods of God’s people departing from God’s truth).<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word for judgment, *Shaphat*, appears in some form 469 times in the Old Testament. However, there is a sharp biblical distinction between a cold, harsh judge and the concept of a loving God judging who is clean and unclean. In Scripture, a judge “was divinely commissioned to actively seek after evidence for the purpose of distinguishing between good and evil and vindicating the right.”<sup>3</sup> Those who have been gifted God’s righteousness in Christ should take heart. We know that God sees us for who He declares us to be and not for our behavior. The “unclean fish” in the parable face an ominous future judgment in which God will identify them as unfit to enter His kingdom.

The parable likens the netting, catching and sorting of fish with God’s intentional kingdom activities during this age.<sup>4</sup> The parable makes three distinct points. First, this age will end with a judgment of the gentiles. Second, God will grant the righteous citizenship into the messianic kingdom. Third, the unrighteous will be excluded. The details of this judgment are spelled out in detail in Matthew 25:31-36.<sup>5</sup> Dennis McCallum of Xenos Christian Fellowship says, “It’s the judgment of God that makes the grace of God matter!” **NH**

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## POINT TO PONDER

God will banish unredeemed mankind from His presence for all eternity.

## FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Evaluate your level of urgency sowing gospel seed knowing that God will differentiate between the saved and unsaved in a final judgment. Strategize ways to build relationships that will open the door to gospel opportunities.

## PRAYER POINT

“Dear God of righteous judgment. Move me God. Pass on a sense of urgency for the eternal destiny of the souls around me. Give me wisdom to be ‘wise as serpents and harmless as doves.’” (Matthew 10:16)

## NEW AND OLD TREASURE

Jesus finished a grueling day of teaching with a timely parable. He addressed the palpable tension in the room head on. Those listening to him anxiously wondered, “What about the old (former) system of law?” and “How does established Judaism fit in with this new teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven?”

Imagine how disoriented you would be if you boarded a plane bound for a warm vacation in the Caribbean but you woke up just as the pilot announced, “Welcome to Siberia. The current temperature on the ground is 30 degrees below zero.” The disciples went through something far more bewildering

2000 years ago. Jewish tradition and the ruling religious elite taught that Messiah would physically deliver the Jews from bondage and persecution at the hands of the Romans. Jesus shattered those expectations with parables like the costly pearl. Instead of a physical kingdom, Jesus offered the “pearl” of the church age, encouraging the disciples to view it as far more precious than their Jewish nationality or their birthright as sons of Abraham. Yet the disciples, like all Jews, viewed their heritage in Judaism as more precious than anything in the world. Jesus graciously addressed this tension with the following parable.

## MATTHEW 13:51-53

51 “Have you understood all these things?” They said to Him, “Yes.” 52 And Jesus said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old.”

As an empathetic caregiver/ teacher, Jesus was moved with compassion for the disciples who were battling the voices in their own heads about these new truths. God lovingly communicated His kingdom purposes to the disciples intentionally and clearly.

### Consider the following:

1 Jesus asked the disciples, “Have you understood all these things?” Modern interpreters sometimes render this phrase, “Do you understand all these things *better?*”<sup>1</sup> This translation would leave room for the disciples to grow in their understanding as kingdom events continued to unfold around them. Jesus showed heartfelt consideration for the disciples’ humanity.

Jesus Himself had once sat right where they were sitting – at the feet of a Rabbi. He empathized with their struggle, as students, to understand the features of the kingdom of Heaven. He expects the same studious efforts from us.

2 Root cellars and food storage were early American necessities. The early settlers prepared darkened rooms under their houses to keep food from freezing in winter and spoiling during the warm summer months. Many basements had rooms dedicated to this purpose. Many of us remember our mothers and grandmothers emerging enthusiastically from cold storage and presenting food items to us. They would open a jar of peach preserves and lovingly dish them out. To me, it seemed

like my grandma was saying, “I stored these just for you,” with each scoop. Other times, instead of serving previously stored items, Grandma would take freshly baked cookies straight from the oven.

The ancient reader would have had a similar picture in view when Jesus spoke this parable. In a patriarchal society, the man of the house would have had dictatorial control over the items stored in his house. (The idea of everyone hungrily rummaging through the cupboards and fridge for tasty food items after school or work had no parallel in Jesus’s time.)

The esteemed owner in the story had looked ahead, considered the needs of his family, and was fully prepared to supply their needs as well as his own. When the occasion arose, the owner brought forth old and new items and presented them to the members of his household. The presented items could have been last year’s grain or yesterday’s honey, but they always met a pressing need or fulfilled a specific purpose. The point of the parable is that Jesus, the

esteemed Rabbi, was teaching truths that both contradicted and confirmed the disciples’ ancestral beliefs. Jesus, the master of the house, corrected wrong thinking while confirming biblical truth. As He carried out an earthly teaching ministry, it was as if He were taking both new and old truths from His “storeroom” to meet the knowledge needs of the people.

The disciples knew the ancient prophecies about a kingdom in which messiah would rule but knew little about the foretold rejection of the messiah.<sup>2</sup> The disciples knew the ancient stories about God’s judgments to purify the nation but couldn’t fathom how good and evil could co-exist until a final judgement. The parable of the storehouse should have prepared the disciples to embrace new kingdom teaching without diminishing the importance of God’s spiritual history with Israel. In turn, the disciples would become the masters of storehouses of knowledge that they would open to the needs of a hungry world. **NH**

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## POINT TO PONDER

The storehouse of God’s Word contains both new and old truths that contribute to the re-programming of my entire worldview. For example, we must understand the system of blood sacrifice in the Old Testament to better understand Christ’s blood sacrifice in the New Testament.

## FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Read Leviticus 21-24 this week to gain a better appreciation of the “old” system of Law that Israel lived under. Then read the book of Galatians to see how the new system contrasts with the old. Evaluate if there are ways that you try to earn God’s favor. Remember, Christ earned God’s favor for us.

## PRAYER POINT

“Dear God of the storehouse. You have safely stored away the answer to every question I need answered. Thank you, God, for being the God of the Old Covenant and the New.”

## IN THE MEANTIME...

From the spring of AD 31 until October of AD 32, the Spirit of God did not record a single parable spoken by Jesus. This lesson bridges the time that passed between the parable “New and Old Treasure” that we just studied, and the next parable “The Wicked Servant”. Let’s pick up where we left off...

Jesus was exhausted. He had spent the entire day teaching kingdom concepts from the boat and then in the house. Late in the afternoon, He and the disciples boarded the boat and began the 5-mile trip across the sea of Galilee to a city called Gerasa.<sup>1</sup> While Jesus slept soundly in the front of the boat, a violent storm blew in. He woke up to the frantic disciples accusing him of not caring if they drowned. Jesus chided them for their lack of faith and then rebuked the storm. The wind and waves quickly calmed down. The disciples responded to this miracle with amazement, asking, “Who is this? [What kind of man is this] that even the wind and the waves obey Him?” (Matthew 8:24-27)



When they finally arrived in the Gentile city of Gerasa in the middle of the night, they were met by a raging demon-possessed man screaming, “What do you want from me Jesus Son of the Most High God?”

Jesus cast the demons out of the man and into a herd of pigs. The pigs hurled themselves into the sea and drowned. This spectacular display put an exclamation point on an already long day for Jesus and the disciples! Now, after a sleepless night, Jesus and His disciples get back on the boat and return right back to Capernaum in Galilee.

As the summer wore on, Jesus resurrected the daughter of Jairus, healed the woman with an issue of blood (Mark 5:21-43), restored sight to two blind men (Matthew 9:27-31), and endured His hometown’s rejection (Matthew 13:54-58). Soon after this rejection, Jesus sent His disciples out in pairs to teach the kingdom in Galilean towns. He instructed them to not take provisions, but to depend on the hospitality of the Galileans they visited. While the disciples preached the kingdom throughout Israel, Herod beheaded John the Baptist in prison. (Mark 6:14-29)

John’s death was an ominous sign of impending persecution by Herod. Jesus and the disciples left in a hurry for Bethsaida after hearing of John’s murder. The isolated region of Bethsaida was situated just a few miles from where the Jordan enters the sea of Galilee. Crowds from Galilee clamored after Jesus and 5,000 men (plus women and children) gathered themselves to Him. A sad, tired, hungry Jesus began to teach and to heal the people.

As the day wore on, the people grew famished. The disciples argued to dismiss the people to neighboring towns to buy food. Instead, Jesus commanded the crowds to sit. Acting as a kind shepherd, He miraculously distributed a few loaves of bread and two fish. The people, recognizing that Jesus was a prophet, tried to make Him an earthly king.

This misguided gesture to make Him king by force prompted Jesus to withdraw from the crowds to the mountains to pray. He sent the disciples to Gennesaret in a boat. From His vantage point in the mountains Jesus saw the disciples struggling to overcome rough seas. Although He understood their plight, He allowed the disciples to struggle until darkness closed in. Then Jesus appeared to the disciples walking on the very water they were struggling against! Peter joined Jesus on His water walk until fear and doubt set in, and Peter began to sink and had to be rescued by Him. Jesus rebuked Peter for His lack of faith (Mathew 14:22-33).

Jesus and the disciples arrived in Gennesaret and then walked back to Capernaum. The crowd, armed with recent memories of full bellies, clamored after Jesus there. They confronted Him by asking, "Hey, when did you get here?" Jesus rebuffed their question by accusing them of only wanting His rule over their lives because He filled their stomachs with food (John 6:22-27).

The crowds then pressed Jesus with two more loaded questions that revealed their hearts. First, they disclosed their motives by asking, "...What must we do to do the

works of God?" Jesus responded, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one He has sent," (John 6:28-29). Jesus had spent the past two years painstakingly unravelling the idea that works can please God. Rather than accept a relationship with God based on faith, they ungratefully asked for a works formula for pleasing God. Secondly, they ignorantly asked, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you?" (John 6:30). They argued that since Moses had given them bread in the wilderness, Jesus should continue to feed them. Jesus turned the tables on them by saying, "I am the bread of life!" (John 6:35) Jesus then defended salvation by faith saying, "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:40) That's good news.

From this point, the ministry of Jesus began to take on a more somber and less hopeful tone. As the murderous overtones of the Jewish elite became louder, the confidence the crowds had in Jesus began to wane. Jesus started to allude to His impending death (Matthew 16:21) and resurrection. From this point in the narrative, Jesus began a six-month ministry marathon to His death on the cross. **NH**

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## POINT TO PONDER

Do I love what I want from Jesus more than I love Jesus?

## FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Evaluate your own life and look for similarities in the faith response (or lack thereof) with the people of Jesus' time.

## PRAYER POINT

"Dear Bread of Life. Help me to recognize when I constrain You to the confines of my earthly expectations. All I need is You."

## THE WICKED SERVANT

The disciples asked Jesus, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matthew 18:1). This question revealed their tendency to default to worldly thinking. As the air hung thick with competitive awkwardness, Jesus embraced a small child and declared, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:2-4). In the world of Jesus, children were forced to be humble and non-assertive. They were to be seen and not heard. The original hearers of Jesus’s words would have pictured a citizen of God’s kingdom as intentionally meek like a child.



Jesus followed up this teaching moment on humility with three succinct teachings to drive this point home. He made the first lesson clear by declaring that the least in the kingdom is the greatest (Matthew 18:1-6), then he allowed non-disciples to

cast out demons in His name (Luke 9:38-41), and thirdly He told Peter that he should forgive others an infinite number of times (Matthew 18:21-22). Jesus then spoke the following parable to further define a godly kingdom demeanor.

### MATTHEW 18:23–35

23 “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25 But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. 26 So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’ 27 And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ 29 So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ 30 But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. 31 So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. 32 Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ 34 And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. 35 My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”

**A** principle is defined as “a succinct statement of a universal truth”.<sup>1</sup> Jesus taught, in principle, that mankind lives blissfully unaware of God’s kingdom. Jesus also taught the universal principle that Satan actively works to frustrate God’s purposes. Wherever God’s rule is preached and lived, Satan will actively oppose it. Jesus intended us to draw succinct, universal principles from the parable we just read. Let’s discover it together.

**1** Metrology is the study of measurements. The Hebrews borrowed units of measure from Mesopotamia and Egypt. They measured distance with *cubits*, weighed metal with *talents*, estimated capacity with *Ephah*, and measured area with *Semed*. A *Semed*, for example, was the area of land two oxen could plow in a day. The Hebrews further divided each category of measure into smaller units. *Talents* were divided into *shekels*.<sup>2</sup>

The *talent* used in our parable weighed approximately 75 pounds. 3000 *shekels* made up a talent, just like 100 cents makes up a dollar today. The value of one talent was determined by the material being weighed. Jesus used the number 10,000 talents. Regardless of the material being weighed, 750,000 pounds of anything in the ancient world was an incalculable debt. In the parable, a denarii was a Roman coin that was equal to a day’s wage. The second debtor owed the ungrateful servant about three months wages.

**2** Scripture does not speak favorably of slavery but it does recognize it as a harsh reality. God gave laws to govern the institution of slavery without approving of it as a favorable arrangement.

Slavery varied widely by region in the Greco-Roman world. Slaves who found themselves indentured to rural farmers generally experienced poor treatment. Some slaves were even viewed as less than human, much like our early American form of slavery. Urban slaves living in cities like Rome fared much better. In larger cities, slaves could be doctors and even investment brokers. Some slaves eventually earned their own freedom.

In the parable, slaves transacted large amounts of money and even had the right to throw another slave into debtors’ prison. Only anecdotal evidence about slavery in Palestine survives, but the parable Jesus told corroborates what we know about Roman slavery in the time of Jesus. This background on slavery is important in order to understand this parable, and Paul’s posture as the bondsman of God has more clarity. God owns us but we have privileges and responsibilities much like a Greco-Roman slave.

The parable of the wicked servant drives home the following principle: under God’s rule, His unsolicited forgiveness of our horrific sin debt should create a feeling of gracious humility and mutual forgiveness among fellow citizens of His kingdom. **NH**

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## POINT TO PONDER

My willingness to forgive others hinges on my understanding of how much God forgave me.

## FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Take steps to mend a strained relationship with someone you have been reluctant to forgive. Remind yourself of how much God has forgiven you.

## PRAYER POINT

“Dear Forgiver God, Help me to remember Your gracious forgiveness of my sin against You. May the people in my circle of influence experience Your ready forgiveness through me.”

## THE GOOD SHEPHERD

**W**hile individual Jews embraced the rule of God by faith, most of God's people continued to live in disbelieving obstinance. The prophet Isaiah painted a tender picture of God lovingly stooping to gather wayward lambs into His arms during a time of rejection. In the passage, God securely held the lambs close to His heart (Isaiah 40:10-11). The Jewish leaders unjustifiably rejected God's overtures of love. Worse,

they credited Satan for the miracles Jesus, proving that human hearts conceal a bottomless abyss of sin. The following parable reintroduces ancient truth about the character of God. God is a good shepherd and His intentions toward His people are eternally redemptive and not destructive. As you read the following parable, note the relational heart of God for His people.

### JOHN 10:1-21

1 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber. 2

But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers." 6 This figure of speech Jesus spoke to them, but they did not understand what those things were which He had been saying to them.

7 So Jesus said to them again, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8 All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. 9 I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. 11 "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, 15 even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. 18 No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."

19 A division occurred again among the Jews because of these words. 20 Many of them were saying, "He has a demon and is insane. Why do you listen to Him?" 21 Others were saying, "These are not the sayings of one demon-possessed. A demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he?"

**S**heep are fickle, needy and scare easily. They need constant oversight to keep them from wandering away, eating poisonous plants or committing some other ignorant act. They can even spontaneously

die of heart attack when frightened by wild animals. Recently, in England, 116 sheep suddenly died of shock when backed into the corner of a field by dogs.<sup>1</sup> Sheep cannot fend for themselves. In God's

throne room, mankind is seen as helpless and needy like sheep. God appealed to Israel's familiarity with the behavior of sheep and the techniques of shepherding to paint a picture of God's heart for them.

**Consider the following:**

**1** A sheepfold consisted of an enclosed space with walls made with stone or thorny shrubbery. The sheepfold protected the sheep from wild animals, but it also protected the sheep from harming themselves. Shepherds from different family clans used one door to enter the shared enclosure. Familiarity with neighbors prevented trespassers and thieves from entering. Jesus was the one door in the parable that distinguished the true shepherds from imposters.

Each morning, sheep emerged from the sheepfold disoriented and hungry. The shepherd's voice served to guide the sheep from the sheepfold to sources of food and water. Sheep scrambled after their shepherds' voice. Later, after satisfying the needs of the sheep, the shepherd made them "lie down in green pastures" (Psalm 23:1-2), where the sheep chewed their cud and rested contentedly.

God desires rest for His people, a theme woven throughout the Old and New Testa-

ments. (Psalm 62:1; Jeremiah 6:16; Matthew 11:29-30).

**2** Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd. He qualified His statement with messianic intimations by arguing that a good shepherd is even willing to die for His sheep. Jesus "died" to His position in Heaven and to intimacy with Father God in order to fulfill all the messianic prophesies. Jesus emptied Himself of His Heavenly privileges, became a humble servant, and "was made in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:8). The false shepherds, the Jewish religious leaders, could not make such ownership claims. Only Jesus has the characteristics of the true shepherd. Believers (His sheep) heard His voice and drew closer to the heart of God. Those who rejected messiah followed their own hearts and were left to their vulnerabilities, false shepherds, and bogus beliefs.

The parable addresses confusion and uncertainty surrounding Jesus's identity. The people wrestled with the decision to follow Jesus. The disciples had the privilege of proximity, yet at times even they had their doubts. Jesus spoke this parable to provide a compelling analogy for these original hearers. Would they run to the gentle voice of the Good Shepherd or chase after deceptions? **NH**

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## POINT TO PONDER

When I listen to the voice of the shepherd, I thrive. When I listen to my own voice or the sentiments of my culture, I strive.

## FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

Meditate for a moment on the depth of God's love and how He cares for you. He is the kindhearted shepherd that desires rest for you. Open His Word to Psalm 23 and familiarize yourself with His voice.

## PRAYER POINT

"Dear Shepherd God, draw me close to you. May your heartbeat drown out the shrill, panicky voices in my head. May your strong arms protect me from worldly false prophets and their satanic claims. Thank you that you desire rest for me and not harm. You are The Good Shepherd who gifted His life for me. May I submit to your rule over my life in humble surrender."

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