

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

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PREFACE

The parables of Jesus contain rich spiritual truths that are paramount for Christian living. This book is an adaptation of a teaching series I have done on the subject. In these chapters, I expound on a number of parables to derive and articulate from them spiritual principles that you may begin to implement immediately. I am confident that if you will make a faithful effort to put these principles into practice, your life will be revolutionized, and you will begin to think and behave in a way that is more pleasing to God than ever before.

Although much has been said concerning the parables, and most Christians are familiar with at least some of them, their true significance are not often appreciated. As a result, many fail to receive the benefits that they are meant to convey. To understand the parables correctly, we must first learn about their nature and the issues surrounding their interpretation. Therefore, the first chapter will be devoted to explaining the preliminary issues of our study, and in the subsequent chapters, we will be discussing the parables themselves.

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE PARABLES

"Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.'" (Matthew 13:34-35).

Contrary to what many people think, the study of biblical parables can be quite complex. There are many issues involved, much required background information, and many details to observe when attempting to accurately interpret the parables in the Bible.

In this book, we will only go into the most basic elements of the parables, and their spiritual meanings and implications.

Defining Parables. The Old Testament was written in the Hebrew language, but by the time Jesus was born there was a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament called the Septuagint. It is called the Septuagint because seventy scholars worked on this translation. In many theology books, or in commentaries, when you come across the letters LXX, it is referring to this Greek translation of the Old Testament, with LXX being the Roman letters representing the number seventy.

The Hebrew word for parable is "*masal*" (or "*mashal*"), and is used thirty-nine times in the Old Testament. In twenty-eight of those thirty-nine instances, the Greek word used to translate "*masal*" is "*parabole*." In other words, the Hebrew word for "parables," or "*masal*" is used thirty-nine times in the original manuscripts of the Old Testament, and out of those thirty-nine times, the Greek word "*parabole*" is used to translate twenty-eight instances of this word in the Septuagint. From observing the instances of "*masal*" being translated as "*parabole*," one may derive the range of meanings for the word, "parable."

Since it may take many pages to sufficiently introduce the definitions of a parable, we will not go into much detail. The above simply tells you how some scholars have arrived at their definitions of a parable. Some may have differing definitions, and therefore what seems to be a parable to one, may not appear so to another. However, the disagreements are seldom so significant as to render communication and meaningful study impossible.

We are going to use the general definitions that these scholars have formed. The Greek word for parable is "*parabole*" – it is a compound Greek word meaning "to set along side." In biblical usage, a parable offers a comparison or contrast between an earthly reality and a spiritual truth.

When you read the Gospels, you will sometimes see Jesus saying such things as, "The kingdom of Heaven is like..." (Matthew 13:24), or "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to?" (Luke 13:18). These are phrases Jesus used to begin some of

his parables, which seems to confirm the idea that parables may be used to compare or contrast an earthly reality and a spiritual truth.

Why Jesus Used Parables. There are a number of parables in the Old Testament, and in the times prior to Jesus, there are those who spoke parables. But none used them as creatively and effectively as Jesus did.

The Mistaken Popular Opinion. Why use parables at all? One popular but mistaken explanation is that Jesus used them to make spiritual truths easier for his audience to understand. You may hear some preachers say, "God always makes things simple. For example, Jesus used parables while he was speaking to the masses. He took things out of their daily lives to explain spiritual truths to them."

Some preachers encourage their fellow-ministers to be "creative" and "dynamic" in communicating spiritual truths rather than using a highly structured theological or expository approach. However, the apostles and the disciples in the Book of Acts did not follow Jesus' practice of using parables, which is an indication that ministers do not have to use such so-called creative methods. In our ministries, it is best to communicate biblical knowledge logically and systematically, such as through expository sermons and theological lectures.

Let me explain why it is wrong to say that Jesus used parables to make spiritual truths easier for his audience to understand:

His disciples did not understand even the foundational parable before Jesus explained it to them. Mark 4:10 says, "When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables." Jesus had just told the parable of the sower (Mark 4:2-9). The disciples, and even the Twelve, who were closest to him, asked him for its interpretation. Obviously, they did not understand the parable.

Jesus then replied, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?" (Mark 4:13). This indicates that the parable of the sower is a foundational parable, but even the twelve apostles did not understand it until it was explained to them directly. Therefore, it is a mistake to say that Jesus used parables to make spiritual truths easier for the people to understand, since even those who should have most readily understood it failed to do so.

Some may object that perhaps if Jesus had spoken plainly, without using parables, his teachings would have been even more difficult to understand. However, the disciples plainly stated that it was easier to understand Jesus when he was speaking "plainly" rather than using "figures of speech," or parables. This is seen in John 16:29-30: "Then Jesus' disciples said, 'Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God.'"

In this passage, the words translated "figures of speech" in the NIV is rendered as "proverb" in the King James Version. "Proverb," "parable," and "figures of speech" would all be correct translations. What verse 29 makes evident is that proverbs, parables, and figures of speech do not necessarily make spiritual truths more easily understood. The disciples preferred direct and non-metaphorical language instead. The Greek words translated "speaking clearly" in verse 29 means "without ambiguity, and without the use of figures and comparisons."

To paraphrase these two verses, the disciples said, "Jesus, now you are not using figures of speech or comparisons, you not using parables or proverbs, you are speaking without ambiguity, but you are speaking plainly. Now we understand what you are saying, and are able to appreciate the contents of your words. Recognizing the depth of divine insight in your speech, we realize that you know all things, and believe that you have been sent by God."

When Jesus spoke in parables, many in the audience could not understand him, and therefore failed to appreciate how much revelation was contained in his words. But when Jesus spoke plainly, those who heard could more readily recognize the knowledge and authority he possessed.

Not only did the disciples fail to understand the foundational parable, but they also failed to understand many of the other parables. Matthew 13:34-36 says, "Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.' Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.'" So, the disciples not only failed to understand the parable of the sower, but also the parable of the weeds in the field.

Since in John 16:29-30, we read that the disciples found Jesus' words easy to understand only when he spoke "clearly" and not in parables, we can infer that the disciples may have failed to understand many or even most of the parables that Jesus spoke before he gave them the interpretations.

Jesus himself stated that the use of parables would prevent some people from understanding. Matthew 13:10 says, "The disciples came to [Jesus] and asked, 'Why do you speak to the people in parables?'" The question implies that the use of parables, to the disciples, was strange, out of place, or not customary. The disciples may have discerned that the crowds did not understand what Jesus said. We may paraphrase their question as, "Jesus, why do you speak to them in parables? Why do you not just tell them what you want to say? Why do you have to obscure your meaning through the use of parables?"

Skipping to verses 13 and 14, the passage continues: "This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.' In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.'"

The words, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding" indicate that Jesus used parables not mainly to cause the people to understand, but that he did the opposite – he used parables, at least partly, to obscure the meaning of what he was teaching.

The True Reasons. There are at least two reasons why Jesus used parables. Again, we return to Matthew 13:13-14: "This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.' In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.'"

Jesus used parables to hide truths from the hardened. The words of Stephen appropriately describe many of those who were listening to Jesus: "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!" (Acts 7:51).

In contrast to the above, Jesus spoke in parables to grant spiritual enlightenment to those who were genuinely seeking God. After telling the parable of the sower, Jesus said, "He who has ears, let him hear" (Matthew 13:9). Then, he continued in Matthew 13:12, 16-17, 35, saying, "Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.'"

We need to read verse 12 in the context of verse 9, where it says, "He who has ears, let him hear." In fact, we may read verse 12 in the context of the entire parable of the sower, which speaks of hearing the word of God. After telling the parable, Jesus said, "Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him" (v. 12).

Based on the above, to those who rightly hear the word of God, more revelation will be given, "and he will have an abundance." But whoever resists or fails to retain the word of God, "even what he has will be taken from him." The Gospel of Luke has it as, "even what he thinks he has will be taken from him" (Luke 8:18).

If you are genuinely seeking God, you will diligently pursue understanding from God's word, and by thinking on the Scriptures intently, more revelation will be given to you. As the apostle Paul states in 2 Timothy 2:7, "Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this."

Parables help the spiritual growth of one who desires to know God, since he needs to immerse himself fully into the teaching. On the other hand, they hinder the spiritual growth of a person who inwardly resists the Spirit of God. The parables obscure the

mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, and those who are hardened cannot grasp their meaning and implications.

The *Practical Word Studies in the New Testament* has this to say on the subject: "Parables require much thought in order to grasp their meaning. A person who really sought after God would seek, strive, think, and ask until he could find the meaning to the parable. And then he would chew upon the meaning, drawing all the meaning he could out of the parable so that he could learn everything possible about God . . . Jesus wanted the truth concealed from closed minds . . .the carnal were not willing to take the time or effort required to search out the meaning of the parable. Jesus actually said that He wanted the meaning hidden from the closed minded" (Vol. 2; Alpha-Omega Ministries, Inc., 1998; p.1500-1501).

An objection may arise at this point: If "parables require much thought in order to grasp their meaning," why do they seem so easy to understand for many people? And why would anyone assume that Jesus used them to make things easier for people to understand?

The answer is that we have recorded in the Bible itself the interpretations to many of the parables. For example, after the writers of the Gospels record the parable of the sower, they also include the interpretation Jesus gave. In this parable, Jesus talked about a person sowing seeds into the ground, but there are different kinds of soil, each responding differently. When he was alone with his disciples, he explained that the seed was the word of God. Without this explanation, how are we supposed to know that the seed is really the word? It is conceivable that the seed could represent other things besides the word of God without damaging the story's coherence. Without a direct explanation, one may not be able to tell exactly what a parable means.

Although there are parables for which no explicit interpretations are given, the Gospels place them in such contexts as to render an understanding of their meaning possible. Given the proper context, the meanings of some parables become obvious (see Mark 12:12) even without direct explanations.

Further, many people think that they have the correct interpretations when in fact they do not. This is a common situation, and it is not only true with the parables, but with most parts of the Bible – those who are unfamiliar with biblical interpretation often misunderstand passages that they feel confident about.

Then, there are those times when one truly understands the parables. But the purpose of the parables does not stop here. Those who understand them should continue to think on the lessons being taught and proceed to do them.

There are several other reasons why Jesus used parables. For example, he sometimes used them as a weapon against false religious authority. But we will not examine the parables from such a perspective in this book.

Principles for Interpretation. There are several important principles for understanding and applying the parables. The Bible consists of passages written in various literary forms: poetry, narratives, letters (epistles), parables, and so forth. The parables are different from the epistles, which are in turn different from the narratives. Although there are some basic principles that one must observe when reading any part of the Bible, such as respecting the context of a given passage, there are principles specific to understanding the parables.

Each parable contains one main idea. Once it is discovered, our interpretation and application of the parable must be governed by it. Although it has been argued quite convincingly that some parables contain several main ideas, we can at least be certain that the way the parables are used by many Christians, where from each parable is derived numerous applications and doctrines, is mistaken.

Not every detail in a parable symbolizes something. Many who are unfamiliar with biblical hermeneutics do not know this. They go through each parable trying to find what each object or person in a parable represents: "What does this stand for? What does that stand for?" Sometimes a certain object or person does not represent anything significant at all. It is simply there as part of the story. The Bible does not waste words, so we must assume that the entirety of a parable is meaningful, but it does not follow that we may form entire doctrines or major assertions out of details within a parable that are not meant to support such.

Let me give you two examples. Matthew 22:10-13 says, "So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie his hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

Some Christians interpret the "wedding clothes" in this parable as water baptism, concluding that a person is not saved without being baptized in water. They also assert that there was a custom in the early church, where they provided the baptismal candidates with white robes, and these are as the wedding clothes in this parable. But many scholars believe there is no evidence that such a custom existed, and there is no indication that the "wedding clothes" in the parable refers to water baptism. This is a case of reading one's theological presuppositions into a biblical text.

Based on this parable alone, no responsible Christian should be prepared to make the assertion that one will suffer eternal punishment if he professes Christ without also being baptized in water.

Even if there is a direct statement in the Bible saying that one who is not baptized in water is not saved, one should still not use this parable as additional support for this

position, since it is simply not clear enough – we have no indication that any part of it even addresses the issue of baptism.

Another example is the parable of the Good Samaritan: "He answered: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 'You have answered correctly,' Jesus replied. 'Do this and you will live.' But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' In reply Jesus said: 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' 'Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.' Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'"

Augustine interpreted this parable as follows: the man is Adam; Jerusalem is the heavenly city; Jericho is the moon, representing mortality; the robbers are Satan and the demons; stripping the man of his clothes represents removing man's immortality; beating him represents causing him to sin; the priest and the Levite are the priesthood and the religious system of the Old Testament; the Samaritan is Jesus; binding the wounds represents the restraint of sin; the oil and the wine represent hope and encouragement; the animal is the Incarnation; the inn is the church; the next day is after the resurrection of Christ; the innkeeper represents the apostle Paul; the two silver coins are the two commandments of love; and the promise to pay if more is spent is the promise of the life to come.

This interpretation sounds interesting, but extremely unlikely. Depending on one's theological presuppositions, the objects in the parable may represent different things. To a Pentecostal, the oil may be regeneration and the wine may be the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And the innkeeper may be the Holy Spirit, while the two coins may represent two thousand years, if one's eschatology involves the idea that the so-called Church Age will conclude after this number of years, as some dispensationalists believe. These alternatives may make more sense to some people, but how is one to know if they are correct?

It is best not to insist that every object in a parable represents something. The most important issue is to identify the main idea(s) of the parable. In this case, Jesus was trying to answer the question, "And who is my neighbor?" This context should set the boundaries for our interpretation of this parable.

Members of Bible study groups can often be seen to sit in a circle where each would take turn to express their opinions. They would say, "I think this means," "To me this means," or "The Holy Spirit shows me that this means..." when in fact they have no idea what the parables mean. In attempting to identify what each object in a parable represents without any real scriptural evidence, they end up with numerous interpretations, all of which are mistaken, and miss the main points of the parables.

Most private Bible study groups in which no qualified leaders are designated, or where the leaders are present for no other reason than to maintain order, quickly degenerate into pitiful discussions based on ignorant and subjective opinions concerning the Scriptures. It seems that no one can be wrong in such settings, and every person's interpretation, however ridiculous, is respected and acknowledged.

All such groups have no constructive purpose and should be either restructured or disbanded. This may seem drastic to some, but such blatant abuse of the Scriptures, where biblical passages are reduced to vehicles for the expressions of one's private opinions and sentimentalities, must cease in order for true spiritual growth to occur.

When the members of a Bible study group are not mature or knowledgeable enough to carry discussions that are faithful to the Scriptures, it is best to have one who is qualified to teach the people instead. Many Christians, especially those raised in a Western culture, covet the privilege of being heard, but disdain the responsibility of adequate preparation. Although the Bible encourages the participation of Christians in church services (1 Corinthians 14:26), it also states that "ignorant and unstable people distort" the "Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16).

Those who are not qualified to contribute meaningfully to a biblical discussion should remain silent, and learn from others until they begin to mature in their understanding. They may ask questions and at times participate in a very limited way, but their views concerning the Scriptures and spiritual matters in general should not be considered reliable. Biblical hermeneutics is by no means a democratic discipline, where everyone's opinion counts.

Ecclesiastes 5:1-3 says, "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words." In addition, James 3:1 says, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."

The Nature of the Parables of Jesus. The parables of Jesus often provide useful spiritual insights that one can put into practice immediately. They contain some of the most important and effective principles for spiritual growth. Sometimes a parable brings its meaning down to the individual, and the person to whom it is directed must then make a decision based on its implications.

As an example, we will examine a parable recorded in 2 Samuel 12:1-7. David had committed a great sin during his reign over Israel. He committed adultery with Bathsheba, and indirectly (but intentionally) murdered her husband, Uriah. God then sent the prophet Nathan to confront David about this. The way that he confronted David was to tell him a parable: "The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, 'There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.' David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, 'As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.' Then Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!'"

In this parable, the "ewe lamb" is Bathsheba, and the "poor man" is Uriah, her husband. The "rich man" is David. However, not every person or object represents something in this parable.

For example, who is the "traveler" in verse 4? It seems that he does not correspond to anyone in David's actual situation, and any meaning that one may attribute to him (such as temptation) would be little more than pure speculation. In any case, the "traveler" is not essential to understanding this parable correctly. The important issue is that we understand this parable to be saying that David was as the "rich man," who had unjustly taken away the "ewe lamb" of the "poor man," Uriah.

Then, David made a declaration, saying, "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die!" He made a judgment based on this parable, saying that the "rich man" deserves to die. Then, Nathan applied the parable to the individual, David. He says, "*You* are the man!" What was David to do with that? He had judged the situation, and the parable was obviously an appropriate analogy to what he had done. Only after he had made a judgment concerning the situation did he realize that he was judging himself.

Some of Jesus' parables have a similar effect. They cause the hearer to make judgments about the situations or the characters in the stories, then confront the hearer with his own decisions. Even with secular stories, the audience is often led to favor certain characters and to dislike others. Certain characters seem to deserve a good end, while others deserve punishment.

Something similar happens when one studies the parables. The reader may favor a certain character, while he is against another. But then the application of the parable comes down to him, that if the parable describes an analogous situation in his own life, then he should

make the same moral judgment on himself that he has made on the characters in the parable.

Many are reluctant to make moral judgments about themselves if you confront them directly. But when they pass such judgments on the characters in a parable, then one may point out that they are in fact passing judgments on themselves provided that they are committing the same wrongs as the characters in the story. Moral and religious double standards were common, as is also the case nowadays, and Jesus used parables at times to disarm and expose them.

About This Book. To conclude this introduction, let me point out several things concerning the purpose and scope of this book.

This book is deliberately non-academic. After reading the following chapters, those who are interested in a more technical study, which is always beneficial, should consult the many published texts on the subject, with Professor Craig Blomberg's *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1990) being one obvious choice.

We will only discuss several of the parables out of, depending on how you define "parable," the up to sixty-five parables in the Bible. One list says that there are fifty-one parables in the Bible, while another says that there are forty-five. Another list says that there are sixty-five. These different figures come about as a result of different definitions of what a parable is.

We will cover two parables out of each of the following categories: hearing the word of God, prayer, forgiveness, wealth, the exclusiveness of salvation, self-righteousness, and our spiritual duties. The parables do not necessarily have to be grouped this way, but this manner of categorization will work well for our purposes, and it is also faithful to the meanings of the passages we will examine. Some categories of parables that we will not discuss include the following: discipleship, eschatology, good and evil, and reaching the sinner.

2. PARABLES ON HEARING THE WORD

The previous chapter provided an introduction to the parables of Jesus. I discussed the definition and nature of parables, as well as several important principles to keep in mind when attempting to understand them properly. It is now time to study the parables themselves, and we will begin with the parables on hearing the word of God.

It is safe to say that the parables on hearing the word belong to the most important category of parables. Since these are parables on hearing the word of God, when you come to understand them, you will also have learned principles for listening to the other parables and the other portions of God's word.

Parable of the Sower. The parable of the sower, as recorded in Matthew 13:3-9, says, "Then he told them many things in parables, saying: 'A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear'" (Matthew 13:3-9).

Then, in verses 18-23, Jesus gives the explanation of the parable: "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

To summarize, Jesus said that the sower is the person who distributes, publishes, or preaches the word of God. The person who listens to the word of God is represented by one of the types of ground or soil that Jesus refers to.

There are four types of ground: (1) The path – "As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up"; (2) The rocky places – "Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root"; (3) The thorns – "Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and

choked the plants"; and (4) The good soil – "Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

The significance of this parable is evident when Jesus said to his disciples, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?" (Mark 4:13). This indicates that the parable of the sower is a foundational one, and understanding it teaches one how to properly hear God's word, which in turn will enable one to benefit from other parables as well as the rest of Scripture. But as Jesus explains in this verse, one who fails to understand the parable of the sower will also have difficulty appreciating the other parables.

The Key to Spiritual Productivity. Most Christians wish to be spiritually productive, but not many of them are. The parable of the sower teaches us how to be fruitful in our spiritual lives; it shows us the key to spiritual productivity. Jesus says in Matthew 13:23, "But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." There are four types of grounds in the parable, and only the fourth managed to produce. By the same token, although hearing the word of God is the key to spiritual productivity, and many people hear the word of God, not all will be productive as a result.

There are several reasons why one may hear the word and yet fail to be spiritually productive. For example, the lack of understanding will cause one to remain barren even if he or she hears the word of God on a regular basis. Verse 19 says, "When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path."

When a seed is sown "along the path," it does not enter into the soil so that it may take root and grow. A person who hears but does not understand the word also fails to retain it; therefore, the "evil one comes" and takes away the word of God from him. A lack of understanding indicates that the word of God, or the revelation of God, has never taken root in this person's heart.

A person may wake up in the morning and realizes that he has had a dream while sleeping. The dream was so interesting that he wants to remember it, but he can feel it slipping away. It is not uncommon for a person to have the contents of the dream clearly before him upon the first several minutes of waking up from sleep, but then fails to retain it afterward.

There are at least two ways to retain a dream that would otherwise be forgotten. One may attempt to write down the contents of the dream the moment he wakes up, even as the dream is slipping away from his immediate consciousness. Once he has it on paper, recall is no problem.

Another way to remember a dream when one wakes up is to quickly think it through. Usually, a casual reflection on the dream when one wakes up is not sufficient to retain it.

However, if one deliberately review and understand each part of the dream, it is likely that he will continue to remember it later.

Although the above is by no means a perfect analogy to what occurs when one hears the word, the similarities are such that it is sufficient to illustrate how the failure to understand what one hears may also imply a failure to retain and be transformed by God's word. If the word of God is not absorbed by the mind through understanding, it is likely to be lost, just like how a dream may slip away after one wakes up in the morning. It can be as if the person has never heard God's word at all.

The one who hears God's word also needs endurance. Verses 20-21 say, "The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away." The type of person represented in these two verses is agreeable to the word of God. He wants to take sides with the word, but he is not committed to it on a long-term basis. When problems and persecutions come, "he quickly falls away."

When hearing the word of God, this person "at once receives it with joy." He likes what he hears, and he would like to do what God requires, but he has not allowed the word of God to be implanted in him in such a way that he may endure persecution and affliction. Thus, "he lasts only a short time," after which he compromises, and backs off from his stand for the word of God.

If the word of God does not take root in your life, then pressures from Satan, your relatives and friends, or circumstances may test your faith and endurance, at which time you will find it difficult to hold on to the revelation given to you through God's word. This is a common problem with many Christians. They are excited about the teachings Scripture, but their apparent commitment to it often fails to withstand even the smallest tests. The "full armor of God" (Ephesians 6:11) has been given to us precisely so that we may "fight the good fight of the faith" (1 Timothy 6:12).

Many people seem to think that, "If I am going to be attacked for this, then I am just going to let it go. The revelation of God is not worth the problems that it brings." Those who have this attitude will obviously be spiritually barren, and "quickly [fall] away."

Being overly attentive to worldly concerns is also a common reason for spiritual failure. In verse 22, we read, "The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful." These two things – the "worries of this life" and the "deceitfulness of wealth" – would choke the word, and make it fail to produce in a person's life. He who allows the priorities of this world to dominate his thinking, will be "unfruitful" spiritually. As Jesus says in another passage, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:24, 21). We may readily nod our heads to the words of

Jesus, that "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15), but how many of us really believe this?

The apostle Paul reasons that, "No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer" (2 Timothy 2:4). And Psalm 19 reminds us that the "fear" and "ordinances" of God are "sure and altogether righteous," that "they are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb" (v. 9-10). If Christians believe that God's word and the fear of him is "more precious than gold," then why are they still focused on seeking wealth rather than the knowledge of God? Only the knowledge of God is worthy as its own end: "This is what the LORD says: 'Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,' declares the LORD" (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

The truth is that, "The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace" (Romans 8:6). Indeed, we can be confident that God will supply for us and prosper us (Phillippians 4:19), but that is not to be our priority.

In contrast to the above, the "good soil" in the parable "stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop" (Luke 8:15). A person whose heart is as good soil not only "understands" (Matthew 13:23) what he hears, but he faithfully endures persecution and affliction without compromising the revelation given to him – "by persevering," he "[produces] a crop." The "worries of this life" and "wealth" (Matthew 13:22) do not dominate his thinking such that God's word is suffocated in him – he has "a noble and good heart."

So, the person who becomes productive through hearing God's word has the following characteristics: he understands what he hears, he endures through difficulties, and he is spiritually dedicated instead of worldly-minded.

Understanding is the anchor of revelation. When God offers a revelation to you through his word, either taught by a minister or directly from the Bible, seek to understand it thoroughly and accurately. This is how you will anchor and retain it in your heart.

Sometimes a person's problems and persecution will be the direct result of hearing and committing to the word of God that he hears. An obvious example of this is how, in some countries, many suffer political and financial persecution when they become Christians. They have never been persecuted before, but now that they have received the gospel of Jesus Christ, they have become the object of severe attacks from the government and other religious groups. Those without endurance may compromise their faith, and therefore become unproductive in the spirit. Those of us who live in other places may not come under such drastic persecution, but we face opposition that may be just as obvious.

But God does not require you to protect the revelation you received by your own strength. The revelation itself is the very weapon that you should use to overcome any opposition. God has given you "the shield of faith" and "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:16-17).

Finally, a spiritually productive person dedicates his life to the truths that he understands and persists in. Thus, such a person understands God's word, holds on to it, and commits himself to it. He allows God's word to alter his thought life, resulting in substantial changes in his behavior. He refuses to allow the world to define his priorities. He is truly being transformed by the word of God (Romans 12:2).

Quite a few Christians enjoy hearing the word of God, at least portions of it (2 Timothy 4:3), and they wish to have the word of God as part of their lives, but they still think like non-Christians. Their mentality conforms to the world in the areas of finances, social interactions, and even in the area of ethics. It is not possible for such people to be truly fruitful in the spirit.

Ears to Hear. To conclude our discussion on this parable, I direct your attention to Matthew 13:9, where Jesus says, "He who has ears, let him hear." This is perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from this book and from the parables, since how can the word of God benefit one who refuses to hear?

Not everyone who hears the word of God or the parables presented in this book will make the appropriate changes in his life. Some will hear and take to heart the lessons, but many will not, although even the latter may initially receive the word "with joy" (Matthew 13:20). The difference will become apparent when the former become fruitful, while the latter remain barren.

Jesus explains in Matthew 7:24-27, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." The fool is one who does not take the Scripture seriously enough to act on it.

Parable of the Seed. Our discussion on hearing the word of God continues through a study of the parable of the seed as recorded in Mark 4:26-29. In this parable, we will continue see the "seed" as the word of God, since the context of this passage follows Mark's account of the parable of the sower, and therefore may also be applied to the theme of hearing and spiritual growth.

That said, this parable and the principles derived from it also seem to apply in general to things pertaining to the kingdom of God. For example, in accordance with this parable, the kingdom of God begins with little impact on this world, but then expands and gains

strength and influence (see Mark 4:30-32). Thus, the kingdom of God as a whole is also like a seed. But in this book, we will focus on what this parable tells us about the individual Christian's spiritual growth.

We have learned from the previous parable that hearing the word of God is essential to spiritual growth. The logical reaction to this is to begin paying more attention to the Bible, and to do it in such a way as to be able to absorb its meaning and influence. We must also apply the word of God so that it transforms our thinking and behavior. Needless to say, there can be no genuine transformation or growth in the Christian sense without the word of God, just as no crop may be produced without first planting the seeds.

Since hearing occupies such an important place in our spiritual lives, we must also heed the warnings of Jesus to "consider carefully *what* [we] hear" (Mark 4:24) as well as to "consider carefully *how* [we] listen" (Luke 8:18). Of course, there is no reason to limit what the Bible says only to *hearing* and not also *reading*. Surely it is unacceptable to hear properly, but read without the same care. The point is that whenever we are in situations where ideas enter our consciousness, we need to practice the relevant principles taught in the Bible. We must choose carefully what kinds of seeds go into the soil of our hearts, and also be careful of how we hear, that is, to examine what kind of soil we are to begin with. The seed must be right, and the soil must be right.

The parable of the seed is as follows: "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4:26-29).

Spiritual Growth is Gradual. Great spiritual growth usually does not come suddenly or in spurts, although that sometimes happens. A seed in the soil grows in stages: "First the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head." So it is in spiritual growth – one does not become a "full kernel in the head" immediately.

Since this is the case, spiritual growth cannot be measured or perceived on a daily basis. Sometimes God grants us tremendous growth relative to our usual rate, but that is the exception and not the norm.

By saying that spiritual growth is gradual, I am not saying that it has to be slow, since consistent rapid growth can also be described as gradual. The word "gradual" simply implies a process, whether slow or rapid. One may travel consistently at a hundred miles per hour, or at twenty miles per hour – both are gradually moving toward their destinations, but the former is without question traveling faster. With spiritual growth, at times there may be spurts of progress (traveling at three hundred miles per hour), and then the rate of growth will revert back to the person's normal pace. One should therefore not seek spurts of spiritual progress, but rather to increase the consistent rate of growth.

Spiritual Growth is Hidden. Initially, when the seed germinates and begins to grow underground, it is not perceptible to the one who planted it. But that does not mean the seed is not growing. In a similar way, spiritual growth occurs below the surface of one's immediate consciousness at first, and a person may not be able to perceive any measurable progress on any given day.

However, those who have been yielding to the word of God, just as good soil allows the seed to take root and be integrated with itself, are indeed growing spiritually. They may not be able to detect any measurable progress in a week or even a month, but if they were to access their growth over a period of a year or even several years, they would notice significant differences.

Many preachers, in their good intentioned but misleading sermons, maintain that Christian must grow spiritually everyday. A typical admonishment may resemble something like, "Today, you must have more revelation, more wisdom, more love, than yesterday. Otherwise, there is something amiss in your spiritual life." I agree that we must advance daily in our Christian life, but such statements from preachers are not entirely useful if left unqualified. This is because it is not always easy to tell whether one has been growing spiritually over a short period of time.

There is no cause for alarm if you do not notice any spiritual growth in yourself over the past week. However, if there is no detectable progress over the past several months or even years, then this should be an indication that something has gone wrong.

Spiritual Growth is Automatic. The parable also tells us that the soil produces grain "all by itself." In a sense, spiritual growth is automatic, but I only say "in a sense" – I do not mean that no effort is required. Spiritual growth requires much from you, but the emphasis here is that it comes from following God's principles such as hearing his word, and not through the abundance of good works.

The apostle Paul states in Galatians 3:1-5, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing – if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?"

Paul here refers to the Galatians' initial encounter with the gospel, saying, in effect, "When you accepted the gospel and received the Holy Spirit, did you do it by 'observing the law, or by believing what you heard?'" Then, he says in verse 3, "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"

Spiritual perfection does not come by human effort. Your initial experience with God comes from hearing and believing his word, not as a result of some good works that you have done. Paul reasons that the whole of spiritual life works the same way; that is,

spiritual growth also comes through believing the word of God, not through human effort.

It is not because you have been good, and that your goodness was evident through your good works that God visited you and saved you. Instead, you heard the word of God and accepted it as true. By the same principle, spiritual growth is based on hearing the word of God, and not doing good works: "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" While verse 2 is written in the past tense, referring to the Galatians' initial experience, verse 5 is in the present tense, indicating that faith governs spiritual growth as well as salvation (although Paul in fact had in mind the continuation of one's justification).

Justification by faith is opposed to justification by the law. In the same way, hearing is opposed to works in spiritual growth. Just as there are two ways that people pursue justification, faith and law, there are two ways that many seek to obtain spiritual maturity – hearing and works.

The wrong way to pursue justification with God is through the law, or legalism. A legalist begins with a set of laws and trusts that he will become righteous as he follows those rules. However, the Bible teaches that "a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified" (Galatians 2:16).

The right way to pursue justification is through faith in Jesus Christ. One who exercises faith receives from another, but one who pursues righteousness through observing the law thinks that he can produce something good out of himself when he cannot. He is self-deceived.

Although after one has been regenerated, God expects us to perform good works, human effort cannot be the basis for spiritual growth or maturity. One who gives priority to good works seeks to produce spiritual growth by himself, but one who gives the hearing of God's word first place in his life seeks to receive from another, namely, God. This is certainly not to say that one should not spend much time in study and prayer, but one should not do these things with an attitude of earning something from God. Good works should be the effect of hearing God's word, and not the basis for spiritual growth.

Luke 10:38-42 relates an interesting incident that should illustrate the above. It is a story concerning Mary and Martha – one works, but the other listens: "As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' 'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'"

Jesus says, "...only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." What was Mary doing that was so commendable? What was this one thing that was "needed"? She was sitting "at the Lord's feet listening to what he said." On the other hand, Martha "was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made." But according to Jesus, only the hearing of the word of God was "needed." Martha was working, even serving the people, but Mary was listening – and Jesus approved of the latter choice.

Just as Martha's choice was contrary to Mary's choice, works is contrary to hearing. And as in this story, those who are very active doing good works will often think they are superior to and complain against those who choose to give hearing the word of God first place in their lives. Jesus unmistakably sides with the latter group, who have "chosen what is better."

This carries several uncomfortable implications for many Christians, who think that they have God's approval due to their abundance of good works, and despise those who choose first to study and hear the word of God. The former place great emphasis on prayer, evangelism, helping the needy, and other good works. But without a thorough knowledge of the word of God, how would they know they are doing these things properly, in ways that are pleasing to God? Without God's word to judge and govern all our thoughts and actions, we may only assume that our "good" works are truly good based on our good intentions alone, without scriptural justification.

Further, if Jesus himself gives priority to hearing God's word over good works, our good works can hardly qualify to be called such if they are the products of our disobedience against the expressed mind of God.

Against much of popular thinking, the Bible asserts the priority of the ministry of the word – preaching and hearing the Scriptures – over the ministries of prayer, evangelism, counseling, music, charity, and all the rest. The latter ministries must all be founded on and governed by the Scriptures; otherwise, they are not legitimate ministries at all.

Jesus said to Martha, that "Mary has chosen what is better, and *it will not be taken away from her.*" Rather than exhorting Christians to spend more time in prayer and evangelism at the expense of hearing the word of God, we should give priority to the Scriptures, and let prayer, evangelism, and other ministries be the effects of our having heard and received the word of God. Such good works will come from the divine energy generated by the Holy Spirit, and not by the strength of the flesh.

Spiritual growth is automatic not in the sense that it does not require any effort on your part, but that the flesh and the mind should be relaxed instead of tensed and worried in every spiritual operation. The flesh does not assist the spirit by being tense. The mind contributes nothing to the spirit by being worried. Spiritual progress, be it in a person or a church, depends on the life of the seed, not the efforts of the farmer.

Note that some details pertaining to farming, such as plowing and cultivating, have been omitted from this parable. This is because the emphasis is that growth comes from the life in the seed. Of course, we know that the ground needs to be plowed and the seed watered, but "neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:7). Spiritual growth does not come through your fleshly efforts, but it comes from an act of God and the life inherent in his word.

The above is not an excuse for laziness or indifference concerning spiritual matters. Since a parable cannot, nor does it intend to, cover every aspect of the topic it addresses, we must allow it to assert its main idea without assuming that every important issue of the topic is contained in this main idea. A parable cannot cover every aspect of an issue with equal emphasis. It can only emphasize what it is trying to emphasize. Therefore, a given parable may not cover every "loophole" that one may attempt to find in order to avoid perfect obedience to God's requirements. However, when the biblical revelation is taken as a whole, we have a clear picture of our responsibilities. And the Bible indicates that we are not to be negligent regarding spiritual matters.

2 Timothy 2:15 says, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." The NASB correctly renders "do your best" as "be diligent." In other words, work hard to present yourself approved to God. Yet, this verse does not indicate that spiritual maturity comes through good works, since as we have already read that, "neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:7).

This is consistent with what we have been saying; that is, spiritual growth does not come from the abundance of good works such as evangelism and serving, but it primarily comes from hearing the word of God. And indeed, Paul's direction to Timothy regarding the need to be diligent in order that one may "correctly [handle] the word of truth" exactly corresponds to our assertion. Hearing (reading, discussing) the word of God involves much effort. But all the credit goes to "God, who makes things grow."

At this point, I will take a slight digression, which, although it be called such, is not at all irrelevant to our present discussion. That is, according to this verse, the ability to accurately interpret the Bible comes primarily on a large part through diligent study and reflection, and not through the special illumination of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit does have a role in Bible interpretation. For example, it is easy for a non-Christian, one who is without the Spirit, to distort the meaning of Scripture, for "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). It is hardly reasonable to expect one who has been blinded by Satan (2 Corinthians 4:4), who perceives his world almost entirely through anti-Christian presuppositions, to handle the Scripture without distortion or prejudice.

In addition, it must also be acknowledged that God has given some the grace to obtain a larger measure of wisdom and knowledge than is evident in most Christians. For

example, God gave the apostle Paul wisdom, so that from him came insights that even the apostle Peter admits as "hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:15-16). Luke describes Apollos as "a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord..." (Acts 18:24-25). Indeed, God has called some to be "teachers" (1 Corinthians 12:28-29; Ephesians 4:11), and not all are gifted by God through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to fulfill such roles.

So, I am not denying the importance of the Holy Spirit in Bible interpretation, but rather the subjective and irrational approach that many Christians have toward the Bible nowadays, which they attribute to the guidance of the Spirit. They assume that to understand the Bible, one only needs to read passages from it, clears his mind of distractions and thoughts, and the Holy Spirit will reveal tremendous insights to him. Such a mystical approach to gain the knowledge of God has been one of the main causes to the major heresies produced throughout the centuries; yet, it seems that the majority of modern Christians assume this to be the right way to "study" the Scriptures. In fact, the use of rational discussions, commentaries, thoughtful reflections, and the like are considered unspiritual and inferior. Theologians are thought of as the enemies of Christianity and doctrinal preaching are despised as boring and irrelevant – when these are what have been keeping the Church alive in a world that is hostile to its ideas. They are our hope for regaining the superior position in academic discussions, which generate ideas that eventually trickle down to the masses and direct the entire courses of history and civilization.

Professor J.P. Moreland apparently agrees with the above assessment, saying, "We allow one another to get away with applying an understanding of a passage that is based on vague feelings or first impressions and not on the hard work of reading commentaries and using study tools such as concordances, Bible dictionaries, and the like. Why? Because a careful exercise of reason is not important in understanding what the Bible says for many of us..."

"Because of the Bible's nature, serious study is needed to grasp what it says. Of course, the Scripture contains easily grasped portions that are fairly straightforward. But some of it is very difficult, intellectually speaking...The more a person develops the mind and the understanding of hermeneutics...the more he or she will be able to understand the meaning and significance of the Scriptures.

"Unfortunately, many today apparently think that hard intellectual work is not needed to understand God's propositional revelation to us. Instead, they believe that the Holy Spirit will simply make known the meaning of a text if implored to do so. Tragically, this represents a misunderstanding of the Spirit's role in understanding the Scriptures..." (*Love Your God With All Your Mind*; Colorado Springs, Colorado: Navpress, 1997; p. 26, 45-47).

Back to the parable: We should diligently pursue spiritual progress, but it is God's word understood and believed in our minds that cause our spiritual maturity. This is why the

one who plants and waters is almost left out of the parable. The farmer in the parable merely observes the growth, and does not cause or aid the growth.

The implication for ministers of the gospel is that they should promote spiritual growth through the word of God and not through their fleshly efforts. In their eagerness to promote spiritual growth and activity in their congregations, many pastors exert themselves in promoting evangelism programs, prayer meetings, and other church programs. Although these things may be good, and as far as their intended purposes are concerned, productive, our focus should be in promoting spiritual growth among the people by the preaching of the word of God. Promote the word of God instead of spiritual activities. Teach them to be like Mary first, that they should sit at the Lord's feet and hear his word, and then they will go out and perform their spiritual duties with joy and competence.

Spiritual Growth is Certain. If one hears the word of God properly, that is, as taught in this parable and the parable of the sower, spiritual growth is a certainty – it will surely happen. As mentioned, spiritual growth does not occur to everyone who hears the word of God. In the parable of the sower, there are four kinds of ground, but three out of those four failed to produce. Three out of the four did not truly receive the word of God.

So, not everyone who hears the word will produce, but if one who hears the word of God properly as taught in the parable of the sower, who receives God's word with "an honest and good heart" (Luke 8:15, NASB), and brings forth fruit with "perseverance" (Luke 8:15, NASB), then spiritual growth is a certainty.

Spiritual Growth will be Manifested Publicly. We have noted that spiritual growth is initially hidden, but one's spiritual progress will eventually be publicly observable. The kingdom of God is such that what one does in secret will in time be apparent to all.

Mark 4:29 says, "As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." At first the seed is in the ground, and you cannot even see it, but eventually the harvest will come, and you will reap the benefits of it.

As previously mentioned, this parable and a number of others that we will endeavor to apply to our personal lives may also refer to the kingdom of God in general. For example, the kingdom of God is initially as "the smallest of all your seeds" (Matthew 13:32), and its growth begins in obscurity. Then, it grows and increases in influence, due to the power of the word of God, and not our fleshly efforts. The harvest, therefore, can refer to the end times.

But we apply what occurs to the kingdom of God in general to our own lives – the way the kingdom of God expands surely applies to the way a church grows, as well as our personal progress, since the kingdom of God is composed of individuals.

Now, it says in 1 Timothy 4:15, "Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress." Spiritual growth, therefore, will

eventually be publicly observable. Paul says in 1 Timothy 5:24-25, "The sins of some men are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them. In the same way, good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not cannot be hidden." The sins and righteous deeds that are now hidden will eventually be manifested.

In Mark 4:21-23, Jesus says, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."

Conclusion. "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." Pay attention. Observe. Receive the word of God. And spiritual growth will be a certainty in your life.

This parable encourages patience in Christians. Patience in that you must wait, because spiritual growth is gradual. If you hear the word of God today, you may not observe any measurable difference in your life by tomorrow. Patience is required, just as a farmer must wait for his harvest. But eventually, the harvest will come.

This parable also encourages faith, because you must rely on the life of the seed, believing that the seed will grow "all by itself" (Mark 4:28). We must trust the seed; that is, to understand and agree with God's propositional revelation.

We must have a carefree long-term expectancy toward the things of God. This is when one does not become anxious as time goes by, even when the promises of God are still not yet manifest. Instead, this person waits with positive faith, trusting that the promises of God are sure and powerful. When you have this attitude toward God's word, spiritual productivity is certain. It will happen.

3. PARABLES ON PRAYER

In the previous chapter, we discussed two parables on hearing the word of God. They are the foundational parables, since the ability to hear the word of God properly enables one to benefit from the other parables and the rest of the Bible.

We will now proceed to examine two parables on the subject of prayer, and see what spiritual truths we may derive from them.

The Friend and the Unjust Judge. The first parable comes from Luke 11:5-10. Jesus begins by saying, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him'" (v. 5-6).

In those days, it was a great embarrassment and dishonor to fail to have the right things set before your guests when they visit. Even the poor would attempt to treat their guests as nicely as possible.

The man in this parable faces potential embarrassment because he does not have the needed items to treat his guests properly. So, he went to a friend's house and said, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him."

His friend from within the house answers him, saying, "Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything" (v. 7).

At that time, the common people lived in one-room houses. An entire family lived in the same room, and the floor was made of mud. The inhabitants would step on the mud so many times that it became a hard floor. One would get his feet dirty and may even awaken the rest of the family if he wakes up and walks around the house to find bread to give to this friend.

In addition, the door was shut. During the day, the door would usually be opened. When the door was shut, it indicates that the family desires privacy, or that the family has gone to bed. This is the case in this parable: "Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything." In other words, this person is asking his friend to give him something at the latter's expense, and at great inconvenience.

Jesus concludes the parable by saying, "I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs" (v. 8). Then, he applies the parable to our prayer life,

saying, "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened" (v. 9-10).

Our next parable concerns a widow and an unrighteous judge: "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: 'In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' 'For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?'" (Luke 18:1-8).

Some parables are designed for comparisons, while other are for contrasts. In these parables, God is not said to be similar to the friend in the house or the unjust judge, but as one who is much more willing and generous than they (Luke 11:9-13, 18:6-8).

The point is that if the friend would give, even when inconvenient, to one who asks, and the judge would grant the widow justice contrary to his own nature and interests, how much more will God give to those who ask, seeing that he is, unlike the friend and the judge, both limitless and generous?

Jesus says in Luke 11:9-13, "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

This passage follows immediately from our first parable. So, the context indicates that Jesus is not saying that God is like the friend, that if you bother him long enough, if you shamelessly intrude into his life in the middle of the night, then even though he will not answer your prayer on the basis that he is your heavenly Father, he will grant your request on the basis of your persistence. But Jesus is saying that if the friend in the parable would grant the person's request even in the midst of such inconvenient circumstances, how much more will God, who is not subject to such natural limitations, be willing to grant your requests?

Then, we also have Jesus' comments on the second parable. He says, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the

earth?" (Luke 18:6-8). Jesus says that God will see that "his chosen ones...get justice, and quickly." He will not delay. God is not like the unjust judge in his dealings with us.

On the basis on the above explanation, I will now bring out several points about prayer that these two parables teach us.

Have Courage. Jesus says in Luke 11:8, "I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs."

The Greek word translated "boldness" (NASB: "persistence") in this verse means to be shameless. The man in the parable is not embarrassed to intrude into his friend's life and ask for what he needs. He refuses to allow the customs and lifestyles of that day to prevent him from asking from his friend what he needs. Jesus explains that the friend granted his request not because he was his friend, but because of his boldness, or shamelessness.

Christians must realize that God is willing to grant their requests. If even one who is reluctant to give eventually capitulated, how much more will God give to those who ask from him, seeing that he is not reluctant, but rather eager to give to us?

Thus, Hebrews 4:16 encourages us to approach God with our prayers, saying, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Some people are embarrassed about the nature of their needs, thinking that they should not really bother God with them. Then, there are others who feel that their sins are so shameful, that they are too embarrassed to confess them to God. The truth is that God already knows what our needs and sins are before we communicate them to him. It is only to our advantage that we ask God for what we need, and to confess our sins to him.

Some are embarrassed about the nature of what they desire. If what one desires is not in contradiction to the revealed will of God in the Scriptures, then he needs not hesitate about bringing the request to God in prayer. Jesus says in Luke 11:9, "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

Neither should you be embarrassed about the magnitude of your needs. Some people imagine that their needs are too insignificant to bother God with them. It would be an insult, they think, to bring such requests to God. Surely God would intervene if it were a life-or-death situation, but maybe one should take care of small needs by himself. Then, there are those who think precisely the opposite – that is, their needs are too great to think that God would meet them. It would be reasonable to request small favors from God, but who are they to expect God to intervene in any major way? Both sides are irrational and unscriptural. The magnitude of the request is not relevant – Jesus teaches us to ask.

God has no human limitations such as the friend does in the first parable. He will not say, "Do not trouble me. I cannot get up because I have already shut the door," or, "My children have already gone to bed, please come back tomorrow." Rather, "He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD watches over you – the LORD is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore" (Psalm 121:3-8).

In addition, God has no evil dispositions such as the unjust judge. He will not withhold justice or answers to your prayers due to malice, only to surrender to those who persistently bombard him with their requests. Rather, the "Father has been pleased to give [us] the kingdom" (Luke 12:32), and "will see that [we] get justice, and quickly" (Luke 18:8). After all, if he "did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32).

Have Persistence. Jesus also teaches us to have persistence when we pray. In the parable of the unjust judge, he says, "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" (Luke 18:4-5). At the beginning of the parable, Luke gives us its context and intention: "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1).

This parable teaches us that we should continue to pray at all times and on all occasions, and do not lose heart. Do not be discouraged. The widow in the parable was not deterred even though she was facing an unrighteous judge.

Corruption was rampant in the legal process at that time. Bribery was almost a necessity if a person wanted his case to go through successfully, and for the judge to decide in one's favor. One such as the widow in this parable had almost no chance of obtaining what she needed, because most likely she would not have had the money to give a meaningful bribe to the judge. Yet, the widow's persistence compelled even this judge to grant her justice.

In connection to prayer, we must be persistent in the midst of criticisms from relatives and friends. We must persist in seeking God and expecting his intervention in the midst of demonic attacks against our minds. Satan may put thoughts into our minds in the attempt to cause us to doubt God's promises. The Bible says that when one prays to God, "he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:6-7).

We must persist regardless of circumstances – we must not give up if they do not change immediately. Paul encourages us in Galatians 6:9, saying, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

Just as patience is important to spiritual growth, we must persist in our prayer lives, since sometimes the answers may take just a little longer than we prefer before they manifest. In any case, Jesus assures us that God is responsive to his people's needs: "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly" (Luke 18:7-8).

Have Faith. Luke 18:8 ends with the words, "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

God's willingness is not in question when we pray; rather, the issue is whether we have faith. God is not withholding anything good from you. Jesus says that he is not like the friend in the first parable, who was reluctant to help due to inconvenience. He also says that God is not like the unjust judge, but he will avenge you quickly. Thus, the problem of prayer, if there is one, is not in God, but in us. The question is, do you have faith?

You must believe that God is resourceful – he is able to provide what you need. You must believe that God is willing – he will to give you what you ask for. You must also believe that God is generous – he will give you an abundance of what you need and what you want.

Conclusion. These two parables teach us that God is willing to give us what we ask, and he will respond to our prayers quickly and with great generosity.

If a friend will give you what you ask when it is inconvenient, and even an unrighteous and corrupted judge will grant your request, how much more will God supply your needs and vindicate you in every situation?

The problem then, is not with God's willingness or ability, but with our faith. "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

4. PARABLES ON FORGIVENESS

This chapter examines two parables on the topic of forgiveness. We will begin with a familiar one, namely, the parable of the Prodigal Son.

The Prodigal Son. The parable is recorded in Luke 15:11-32 as follows: "Jesus continued: 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

The nature and intent of this book does not demand that we be too exact in our understanding of this parable. Nevertheless, any imprecise interpretation should not be considered as the conclusive one. And certainly, a more advanced study of this and other parables will require greater efforts to establish the precise meaning.

With that in mind, we will take the younger son as either a backslider or an unbeliever, while the Pharisees, religious people who are unsaved, or the older Christians who are

self-righteous may be represented by the older son. The father in this parable, of course, would be God.

The Damage of Sin. Given the above assumptions about this parable, verses 13-16 teach us about the damage of sin: "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything."

Sin removes a person from God. It drives one to live in such a way that is not pleasing to God. Here, I am not referring to those Christians who occasionally sin, but those who are unsaved, or those who have drifted away from God through sin, and are now living in a sinful manner. A person who is living a sinful lifestyle will usually spend less and less time going to church, reading the Bible and worthwhile Christian books, praying, ministering to other believers, and in spiritual activities in general.

Verse 14 indicates that a sinful lifestyle leads a person into spiritual poverty: "After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need." This younger son took his father's wealth, went away from him, and squandered it on his own pleasures. Then, there was a famine, and he began to suffer lack. But his father was not impoverished. Those who remained in the father's household were not affected.

Likewise, even though God has "blessed [the Christian] in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3), those who remove themselves from God and begin to live sinfully will suffer apparent spiritual poverty as if they are not part of the father's household.

Then, spiritual corruption creeps in – sin causes a person's thoughts and behavior to undergo decay: "So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything" (v. 15-16).

The Jews considered feeding pigs as the lowest occupation that one could have. And we see in verse 16, that this younger son "longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything." Not only did he have to involve himself in the lowest work that a Jewish mind could imagine, but he had fallen to such a low point that he envied the pigs. Apparently, the animals were enjoying better meals than he was.

And so, while a person can live a clean and healthy life when he is in fellowship with God, sin brings corruption and decay into a person's life. A person who backslides from the Christian faith, who begins to live a sinful lifestyle, often demonstrates through his mental attitude, speech, actions, and preferences an increasing degradation, until he is as

the younger son described in the parable. He is as one who feeds pigs, and even envies them.

The Repentant Mindset. We begin to see a turnaround in this younger son's life in verse 17: "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!'"

Note the words, "When he came to his senses." While verse 13-16 teach us about the damage of sin, verse 17-19 demonstrate the repentant mindset. After living in sin for a time, some sinners begin to come to their senses – they begin to experience repentance.

The first indication of such a mindset is that the person begins to see things more clearly. The younger son says to himself, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death." Even those who are the least in the Church, and even those who are not among the most spiritual, are better off than those people who are living in sin.

Not everybody thinks this way. At the beginning of the parable, the son thought that it was better to take the father's wealth, to leave the family, and do what he wanted. The Israelites whom Moses had led out of Egypt complained and said, "We were better off in Egypt!" (Numbers 11:18).

Too many Christians are also like this. They often claim that they were better off before they became Christians. If that seems to be true, most of the time it is because of two reasons. First, they have never grown spiritually through hearing the word, prayer, and being involved in ministry. They are miserable and defeated because they have never done anything meaningful as Christians. Second, many think that their lives were better before they became Christians simply because they have forgotten how bad it was.

The Israelites complained against God and Moses, saying, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death" (Exodus 16:3). But they had forgotten that they were slaves! The Egyptians placed "slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor" (Exodus 1:11), and that was certainly not as good as being out in the desert with the presence and provisions of God. Yet, through unbelief their minds were clouded and they made incorrect assessments of their situation.

The word of God tells us in Psalm 103:2, "Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits," but many Christians forget how bad their lives were before they were saved by God. They dwell on all the "pleasures of sin" (Hebrews 11:25) that in fact had them in Satan's snare before God "rescued [them] from the dominion of darkness and brought [them] into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Colossians 1:13).

Thus, the initial step in repentance is to think clearly – that is, to see one's situation as it really exists. The younger son "came to his senses" in verse 17. He "snapped out of it," in

other words, and began to turn toward God. Similarly, one who has adopted a repentant attitude begins, by the grace of God, to see things clearly, and as a result, begins to turn to God.

He says in the first part of verse 18, "I will set out and go back to my father." One who humbles himself and repents sees that it is in fact better to be a faithful Christian, that being a Christian is far superior to being an unbeliever. Such a person begins to say, "I should start reading the Bible again. I should start praying again. I should repent of my sins and ask God to forgive me."

The parable continues in verses 18-19, saying, "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men." True repentance is never boastful or demanding. It is not demanding because it understands and sees clearly. It realizes that it is in no position to demand anything of the one from whom it seeks mercy. "Grace expected or demanded is a contradiction in terms" (Michael Horton, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994; p. 92).

Those who think very highly of themselves, whether with good reason or not, can be quite demanding: "I want this to be done, I want that to be done. I want you to give me this, I want you to give me that." They think they have the right to say such things.

But one who is returning to God from a sinful lifestyle with a repentant attitude relies on the mercy of God alone. Just like when we say that one "throws himself at the mercy of the court," having no strong argument in one's favor and on which one may depend, one who is repentant says, "I can do nothing. I cannot undo what I have done. I cannot pay the debt that I have incurred. All I can do is to place my life in God's hands, and be at his mercy, and let him do whatever he wants with me."

This is what the younger son in the parable has done. He says, "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men." He realized that he was in no position to demand anything of his father. He only hoped that his father would be merciful, and make him as one of his hired men.

The Restoration of God. Then, we learn about the nature and the extent of God's restoration in verses 20-24. Verse 20 says, "So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

God's forgiveness is active, not passive. God is actively seeking the sinner and reaching out to him. Jesus says in Luke 15:4-5, "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders."

God is not indifferent to your sins. He is not just sitting there passively, waiting for you to come crawling back to him, and to confess your sins to him. Of course, you must be willing to return to God, just as we see that the prodigal son must at some point "come to his senses," adopt a repentant mindset, and begin to walk back toward his father.

But at the same time, the father is not passive: "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him." God is compassionate toward those who are repentant. Further, "he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." God is actively seeking out sinners and convicting their hearts, causing them to repent.

The apostle Paul observes that, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Romans 3:10-12). And Jesus says in John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day." If God were to be passive concerning our deliverance from sin, no one would be saved.

Not only is God actively reaching out to sinners, forgiving them of their sins, but his restoration is instant, not gradual: "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet'" (v. 21-22).

Sin's damage is usually gradual, even when rapid. The corruption and degradation of a person is a process, and it does not occur instantly. When a Christian returns to God, he needs not think that it may take years before he reaches the former place of fellowship with God again. He needs not think that it may require much effort, time, and agony to regain the place of spiritual authority and revelation. But God grants one his former place, from which he has fallen, instantly when he repents. In fact, a Christian does not lose his relationship with the Father when he sins, but the fellowship and communion between him and God is damaged. God can restore this instantly when a Christian comes to genuine repentance.

Nevertheless, a person who had been living a sinful lifestyle may not be restored to all of the ministry responsibilities that he may have previously. If personal relationships have been damaged due to his sins, such may also require time and effort to heal. But with God, our restoration is instant – in other words, a Christian who repents and returns to God is not an inferior Christian, at least in terms of position, than one who has always been faithful. However, it may be true that this person also needs to renew his mind and unlearn a number of sinful habits before it becomes possible for him to live a productive Christian life.

The father in this parable said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet" – indicating that he is not a slave, but a son in the house. He is restored to his former position right away.

We also learn from this parable that God's pardon is complete, not partial: "Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate" (v. 23-24). One who lives in sin is as one who has died, but when he returns to God, he is brought back to life. Here, we see that God's pardon is complete. He forgives without reservation. Such is not always true with human relationships.

A Self-righteous Mindset. In contrast to the repentant mindset, we will now proceed to examine what this parable shows us about a self-righteous attitude. Luke 15:25-30 shifts the attention to the older son: "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'"

The older son, symbolic of the Pharisees, became angry. Many falsely religious individuals place great emphasis and pride on their own works. Their attitude may be seen in passages such as Luke 15:1-2: "Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

Not that those whom the Pharisees perceived as sinners were not in fact sinners, but the problem was that the Pharisees considered themselves as spiritually superior due to their own outward behavior: "[They were] like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean" (Matthew 23:27). Thus, Jesus warns, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:3, 5).

Some tend to think that as long as they do not belong to what they perceive to be the worst group of sinners, they will do well. The biblical response is that unless they repent, they will perish just like the worst of sinners. Only through faith in Jesus Christ will one be saved and accepted by God.

A self-righteous person is also one who feels indignant against grace, because he depends on his own works, as can be seen in verses 29-30 of this parable: "But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'"

Self-righteous individuals think that they have done many good works, and that they have never committed sins, at least not major ones. Therefore, they feel indignant when one who has committed many sins receives instant forgiveness and restoration from God. A self-righteous person thinks that good works earn, or should be able to earn, merits with God. And they perceive their own efforts as good works that are able to satisfy God's high standards. However, the Bible states that "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6), and that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Just as a sinner must begin to perceive the truth concerning God, sin, and himself before he can experience repentance, a self-righteous person is one who fails to comprehend the true nature of sin and grace. The older son says to the father, "But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" (v. 30).

In other words, one who depends on his own works despises grace as something that gives license to and excuses sin, rather than a demonstration of God's kindness and mercy. This person's thinking toward grace is twisted and warped. The older son says to his father, in effect, "You are rewarding my brother for his sin. This son of yours has taken your wealth and wasted it – he did no good with it, but spent it all on his own pleasures. After he has nothing left, he came crawling back to you, and now instead of punishing him, you are rewarding him with this party! You are wrong. My brother's return does not deserve forgiveness and celebration, but that is what you are giving him. I have been in this house, and I have never disobeyed you; yet, you have never even given me a goat."

Self-righteous people, whether in their actions or speech, reflects the misunderstanding that grace is a reward for sin. But the Bible says, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:1-2). The purpose of grace is to restore and forgive, not to give license to sin.

Steps to Restoration. The steps to restoration as conveyed through this parable are as follows:

First, one must return to God. One departs from God through his sins, and now he must return to him. This does not happen until one has "come to his senses" so that he gains insight into his true condition and the righteous nature of God. As the apostle John teaches, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

The Scripture says that, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4). This is certainly true concerning unbelievers. But Christians, to the extent that they are living in sin, are also deceived by the devil. Yet, by the mercy of God, we are enabled to see into the true nature of things, and is led to repentance by God's kindness and patience (Romans 2:4). Even repentance, then, ultimately rests in God's act of grace, and there is no place for boasting or self-congratulations. It is he who makes

"his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

One whom God has enlightened concerning his true spiritual state must then repent of his sins. 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." After confessing and renouncing one's sin, one may rejoice and be confident that God has granted him complete forgiveness and restoration. As it is said in Psalm 32:1-2, "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit."

Celebrating Repentance. Let us conclude this parable with several observations based on verses 31-32, where the father replies to the older son, "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

If you are a Christian, you do not need to have a self-righteous attitude and that you deserve all that God has. You do not deserve all that God has, but everything has been given to you. As the apostle Paul says, "So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God" (1 Corinthians 3:21-23), and also, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3).

The father says in verse 32, "But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." He celebrates not because his son was lost, that he was as one dead, but he was rejoicing in the fact that something has changed in his son, that he has returned and repented of his past way of life.

Similarly, God's forgiveness does not imply that he rejoices in or tolerates sin, but he rejoices in one's act of repentance, that the person has come to his senses, and has returned to place himself completely at the mercy of God, knowing that he has no merit of his own. Thus, Jesus reveals in Luke 15:10 that, "there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. For our second parable on forgiveness, we will read from Matthew 18:21-35, where it is recorded the parable of the unforgiving servant: "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred

denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Our previous parable emphasizes the way God forgives us. This parable, while providing us with further insights into the magnitude of God's forgiveness, focuses on how God wants us to forgive others.

The Magnitude of God's Forgiveness. Verse 24 says, "As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him." The translators of the NASB indicate that, "A talent was worth more than fifteen years' wages of a laborer." Thus, the New Living Translation renders "ten thousand talents" as "millions of dollars."

Professor D.A. Carson points out that the debt may have been even greater: "We glimpse some idea of the size of the indebtedness when we recall that David donated three thousand talents of gold and seven thousand talents of silver for the construction of the temple, and the princes provided five thousand talents of gold and ten thousand talents of silver (1 Chronicles 29:4, 7). Some recent estimates suggest a dollar value of twelve million; but with inflation and fluctuating precious metal prices, this could be over a billion dollars in today's currency" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984; p. 406).

Although some sources say Jesus could have meant either Attic or Jewish talents, either one would amount to millions of dollars in today's terms. This slave owed ten thousand talents, which (according to the estimates just given) was more than a hundred fifty thousand years' worth of a common laborer's wage.

We have said that the parables were often taken from real life and applied to real life, and this one is no exception. Something like what happens in this parable could have happened in that day. However, the amount of what the servant owed the master was unlikely to be that high. It was unlikely for an individual to have owed this amount of money, nor was it probable that a person, no matter how wealthy, would have kept on leading money to a servant until he owed a hundred fifty thousand years' worth of wages.

Here is an example of hyperbole within a parable. The person is said to owe ten thousand talents instead of a more realistic amount in order to illustrate how much we owe God by our sins. Make no mistake about it – although it was unlikely for a person to have owed this amount of money to another individual, every one of us owed this amount and more to God.

Those who were hearing Jesus, as the people in our day, often fail to appreciate the depth of our sinfulness. The fact that many consider someone like Hitler as evil, while they themselves are basically good, speaks only of how humankind has been desensitized to sin.

The idea here is that our debt to God, incurred through sin, is limitless, and it is one that we cannot pay, contrary to those who think that they are quite innocent: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). When speaking to people about their need for salvation, some may respond, "I don't need Jesus. I am not really that bad. Sure, I have made mistakes in my life, but in general, my good works outweigh my bad ones. And I can always do more good works to repay my debt." But the truth is that even a hundred fifty thousand years of good works will not repay what they owe to God.

The Futility of Works. Then, "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything'" (v. 26). What may seem like a heroic statement is in fact quite foolish and unrealistic. How could he have repaid a hundred fifty thousand years' worth of wages, even if he had earnings much more than a common laborer of that time? He could not have repaid the master at all.

Consistent with the rest of the Scriptures, this parable reminds us that our debt to God is too great for us to repay. Our best way to approach God, therefore, is not to boast of our ability, past accomplishments, and promises of good and better works. But we must make ourselves completely vulnerable and place our lives at the mercy of God. The debt is too great, so do not even try to repay it. Before you were saved, it is as if you owed God a debt that you could not pay, not even in a thousand lifetimes. No one, therefore, can be justified or made right with God by their good works.

"Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish'" (Luke 13:1-5).

We also have many vile and violate criminals in our day – there are child molesters, murderers, and bank robbers. There are also those who commit the sins of adultery, fornication, and homosexuality. There are those who are dishonest in their business practices.

Depending on our backgrounds and subjective standards of morality, we may consider some individuals worse sinners than others. And certainly many of us consider many people worse sinners than ourselves. But Jesus, based on the objective and true moral

standard of God, judges everyone as sinful, saying, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish."

To repent means to change your mind, and to turn around. It means to renounce your former way of thinking and living, and that you must accept Jesus Christ as your sacrifice for sin. You must say to God, "I cannot repay this debt of sin. It is too great, and I cannot repay it. I need somebody else to help me, somebody else to pay the price on my behalf. And I acknowledge Jesus Christ as the one who has already paid the price for my sins, and that he had died, and was then raised from the dead for my justification, to be the mediator between God and me." This is the only way to salvation.

1 John 1:8 says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Those who say that they have no sin, that they are good enough in themselves to reach heaven, are not telling the truth. They are self-deceived. When you preach the gospel to someone, the Holy Spirit convicts, or convinces, the hearer that he is not good enough. As in the parable, even if God sells a sinner's wife and children, even if God seizes all of his properties, and even if he were to perform only good works constantly for the rest of his life, or a hundred lifetimes, it would still not come close to paying that debt of sin. Dependence on one's good works, then, can only lead to disillusionment, despair, and damnation.

Forgiveness Based on Mercy, Not Obligation. The servant had incurred a debt that he could not pay, and so "the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt" (Matthew 18:25). Then, the servant begged the master, and promises to repay all the debt, which as we have seen, is an untruthful and unrealistic statement. Up to this point, the situation seems impossible.

But we read in verse 27, "The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go." The solution never came from the servant himself, but rather from the master, who simply forgave the debt out of compassion.

The master canceled the debt not because he had to, or that the servant somehow had the right to his compassion. The master had the right to punish, and the servant had no rights at all. Yet, the master chose to cancel the slave's debt. Likewise, God's forgiveness toward us is based on mercy and compassion instead of obligation. In other words, he has never been required to forgive us of our sins. God does not owe us forgiveness or any of the gifts he gives us. No one has the right in himself to go to heaven.

Although this concept has been preached in many places for a long time, very few people think like this. Many still think in terms of works and earning our forgiveness, being good enough or not good enough. This tendency must change if we were to become productive and successful in our spiritual lives. There should be no question but that we are *not* good enough, and that we need God to save us by his mercy. But once he has "rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Colossians 1:13), we are then "the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Some speak to or about God as if he owes us everything we desire or demand. And therefore, you hear questions like, "If there is a God, why do so many people suffer poverty, hunger, sickness, and other such things?"

Although the Bible offers us answers to these questions, people often ask them with the wrong presuppositions or motives. If we truly understand the severity of sin, and that we are the ones who owe God, then the only valid question should be, "How in the world can there be so *little* suffering in this world when we owe God so much? How can there be so much forgiveness when there is so much sin?" Have you ever thought about it this way? God does not owe you any gifts or blessings – but even the air you are breathing is his gift.

Why is there so much forgiveness when there is so much sin? The Bible explains, "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (Romans 5:20). Such is the magnitude of God's forgiveness and compassion. Such is the perfection of his mercy toward us in Christ.

The Nature of Unforgiveness. Other people's sins against us are always small and insignificant compared to the sins of which God has forgiven us.

Verse 28 says, "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded." A "denarius" was only a day's wages. This servant owes the other one a hundred denarii, and so it was a hundred days' wages. Although it could have been a significant amount of money from either servant's perspective, it was certainly not impossible to repay.

Of course, it would have taken longer than a hundred working days to repay the debt, since not all that one earned could have gone to paying the debt. On the other hand, this person could have been earning more than a common laborer's wage. In any case, although it may have been a large debt from either person's perspective, it was indeed possible to pay it.

And so, the second servant pleads with the first: "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back'" (v. 29). The second servant who owed the money said exactly the same thing the first servant said to the master, only this time the promise to pay is indeed realistic.

Yet, the first servant did not have compassion on his fellow servant as his master had on him: "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt" (v. 30). Here, it says that the first servant "refused." He was not unable to excuse the debt, or to even allow the second servant to repay him, but he was unwilling to do either.

Forgiveness, as indicated in this parable, is a matter of willingness and not of ability. The statement, "I cannot forgive," is never true. It would be more honest to say, "No, although

I understand that God requires me to forgive the person who has wronged me, I refuse to do so."

The parable continues, "When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'" (v. 31-33).

The master reasons that the servant should "have had mercy on [his] fellow servant just as [he] had on [him]." Likewise, God wants us to forgive others in the same way that he has forgiven us – that is, through compassion. Ephesians 4:32 gives us a direct statement teaching us this concept, saying, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

One reason, or excuse, that many people use when refusing to forgive another individual is to say, "I have the right to hold this against him. He has really done me wrong." While the Bible does not deny that others may have in fact sinned against us, it denies us of the right to hold it against them, and command us to have the willingness and compassion to forgive.

The master in this parable does not question whether the second servant owed money to the first, but he denies the validity of the first servant's behavior, in that he who had just been forgiven a debt of ten thousand talents refused to have compassion on him who only owed a hundred denarii.

There are several additional points about forgiveness that we may derive from this parable:

First, we should forgive without taking revenge. In the parable, "The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go" (v. 27). Part of forgiveness is about not taking advantage of one's "right" to punish. God had the right to at least demand partial payment from us for our sins, or to punish us a little, even if not to the fullest extent. Yet, he did not require even the smallest of payments from us, but paid the entire price for our sins through the death of his son, Jesus Christ. In other words, he forgives us at his own expense, just as this master did in the parable, who forgave the servant of his debt at the expense of ten thousand talents.

If you cause a person to suffer physically or emotionally before you "forgive" him, then this so-called forgiveness is not in fact given, but earned. Therefore, if you do that, you are not forgiving as God forgives.

Additionally, we must forgive others in sincerity. As Jesus says at the conclusion of the parable, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (v. 35).

Resentment can hide within a person's heart for years. Although he may think that he has already forgiven another, his attitude basically remains unchanged. But God wants us to forgive from our hearts – completely and sincerely. When we learn to forgive out of compassion, and not out of legalistic compulsion, then we will be forgiving from our hearts. We will be forgiving others for their sake.

This leads us to another point, namely, that we should forgive others for unselfish reasons. The master's forgiving the servant in this parable costs the former ten thousand talents! God also forgives us at his own expense; that is, his son had to die the death of the cross to secure salvation for us.

Some teach others to forgive with the emphasis placed on the benefits to self. For example, they teach that resentment is detrimental to one's health and spiritual condition. Although I agree that these may be the negative effects of unforgiveness, they should not be the reasons for our forgiving those who have sinned against us.

Too many people have been taught to forgive for their own sake. But this is certainly not the most noble or biblical reason for forgiving another. The Bible teaches that we must forgive those who have wronged us based on our compassion for them, thus we forgive for their sake, not ours. We should forgive because of our godly inward nature as Christians, not because we desire better health. And it should not be difficult to have compassion on those who need our forgiveness, since "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:5).

We should forgive others because we are not our own. In reality, we have no right to hold on to unforgiveness and resentment toward other people – whereas God owns us, and therefore has the right to punish if he so wishes, we do not own those who sin against us. God owns them, and we do not own anyone. But even if it seems as if you have the right to withhold forgiveness, the Bible instructs us to have compassion on others, and forgive them at our own expense.

Finally, we must forgive repeatedly if necessary: "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times'" (v. 21-22).

Forgiveness Does Not Imply Blind Tolerance. Even though we need to forgive others sincerely and repeatedly, it does not imply that we should forgive foolishly, with blind tolerance. For example, biblical forgiveness does not imply tolerance toward something such as poor business practices, social decisions, and moral behavior.

If an employee repeatedly fails to perform his duties, it is not wrong or against the nature of forgiveness to dismiss him from the company, as long as you are not bitter against him on a personal level. Provided that you are not bitter against this individual, it is a sound business decision to terminate his employment, since he is not contributing to the purpose of the company as he is supposed to do.

You may even try to locate another job more suitable for him, although that would not be your responsibility. Also, it is not against the nature of forgiveness to tell the truth when another employer calls for reference or information on this person. However, any irrelevant negative comments about him would be wrong.

Further, forgiveness does not imply tolerance toward poor social decisions. It is not against the nature of forgiveness to avoid a friend who repeatedly proves to be a destructive influence to your life or spiritual growth. As the Proverbs say, "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm" (Proverbs 13:20).

If you have a friend that constantly leads you into bad moral situations, and you fail to be a stronger influence on him than he is on you, then it is usually wise to terminate such a relationship. It is not against the nature of love or forgiveness to do that.

Forgiving someone does not always mean that you treat the person as if he has never done what he has done, although it would often imply that. However, what forgiveness always means is that you do not hold what he has done against him on a personal level and that you will not exact revenge against him.

In addition, to forgive someone is not to ignore his poor moral behavior. For example, it is not against the nature of forgiveness to expel a person from your church who repeatedly proves to be an evil moral or doctrinal influence to other members of the congregation: "Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast – as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:6-7).

Jesus says in Matthew 7:6, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces." When attempting to help some people, it is as if you are casting pearls before swine. Jesus warns us against such individuals.

The apostle Paul cautions, "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character'" (1 Corinthians 15:33). If one proves to be a bad influence and refuses to change even though he has been warned on several occasions, then it is in the best interest of the congregation that this person be expelled from the church. It is not against the nature of forgiveness to do so. In fact, we must do this if we were to obey the biblical command: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:15-17).

After hearing the biblical teachings on forgiveness, some may tend to feel guilty when required to take drastic actions such as dismissing an employee, terminating a friendship,

or expelling a person from a church. But as I have shown, such decisions are at times necessary, and does not represent an unforgiving attitude as long as there is no personal hatred involved, and that you still wish the best for the person with whom you must part ways. You may even continue to pray for him.

As Christians, then, we should forgive others as God forgives us – without vengeance and selfish intentions. But at the same time, we must exercise caution and wisdom, since forgiveness does not imply blind tolerance toward evil and foolish behavior, as our examples have demonstrated.

5. PARABLES ON WEALTH

A number of people have made the remark that Jesus had more to say on the subject of wealth than subjects such as prayer and love. This is, of course, not to indicate that wealth is a more important topic compared to some of the others, but perhaps it does reflect the fact that wealth is often more important to people, and they often think about wealth or related matters unceasingly.

Regarding the proper place of wealth, Jesus says, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). So, from the outset, we already know that money is not an object that one should be obsessed with. But people often do not think this way – they judge themselves and others based on their levels of wealth.

It is with money that they are most preoccupied. Certainly, people worry about all sorts of things, such as how their children will turn out, their relationships with other people, or their health. However, much of the time they tend to focus their worries on financial matters.

And so, Jesus counters this and said, "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." But he had much more to say on the subject than this, as the following study of two parables will show.

Parable of the Rich Fool. Our first parable is taken from Luke 12:16-21: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

Although I will not include the texts that appear before and after the parable, the reader should read at least Luke 12:1-34 to secure the context of this parable in his mind.

Preliminary Observations. In the parables of Jesus, an authority figure is sometimes used to represent God (similar to God's character) or to exist as a contrast to God (different or even opposed to God's character). The unjust judge in one of the parables we have studied previously serves as a good example. In this case, he serves as a contrast to God, so the hearer may know how different God is, or how much more eager he is to give to his people, when compared to the unjust judge. On the other hand, God himself is present as a character in this parable, speaking on his own behalf and represented by no one else.

Another point of interest important to the reader is that, although the person condemned by God in this parable is indeed a rich man, a poor man may just as well commit the same mistake spoken against here, and so its application is not limited to those who are wealthy.

The way Jesus' words are arranged by Luke, the contents of verses 22-32 appear right after our parable, and serves to make explicit the rich man's sin, that he has given his thoughts entirely over to creating and preserving wealth, having removed God out of his plans and actions: "Then Jesus said to his disciples: 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom'" (Luke 12:22-32).

Excessive planning. This parable gives us an example of an unwise attitude toward wealth, and especially in the area of planning: "He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods'" (v. 17-18). The richer this person gets, the further he plans for his own life.

Verse 18 speaks of excessive planning. The rich man says, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods." Planning itself is not forbidden in this parable, but excessive planning with no end and no worthy goal is condemned. This person plans only for himself, without limit, and with no thought of God or other human beings.

Temporal Planning. The second indication of unwise planning is when one prepares only for his temporal welfare: "And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry'" (v. 19).

This man plans for his future, but only in respect to the present life: "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years." He speaks in terms of years and days. He speaks of self-indulgence and celebration, but does not concern himself with the afterlife or his spiritual condition. Yes, he plans all right, and he plans for many years to come. But he fails to plan for eternity.

Unspiritual Planning. This leads us to our next point, namely, unspiritual planning is always unwise planning. Besides planning only for his needs, this man does not even plan for his own spiritual needs, let alone those of other people.

In verses 20-21, we read God's response to such a person: "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

God calls one who plans as the man in this parable does a "fool." No matter how shrewd a person seems to be in worldly affairs, if his thinking is unspiritual, he will always be a fool in God's eyes. The Scriptures say, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10), meaning that one who does not fear God has not even started to be wise. Any person who fears God is superior to one who does not. Being rich in itself is not a sin, but this man has left God out of his mind and plans entirely.

This man plans and plans, and says many things to himself, but then God interjects and begins to speak, saying, in effect, "Have you thought of me?" He says, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" No one can truly "plan" God out of his life. One ignores him to his own peril. On the other hand, Proverbs 3:6 instructs us, "In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight."

John Purdy has the following to say concerning this parable in his *Parables at Work*: "If we hold that true wisdom is to be rich toward God, then work will have a limited place in our lives . . . We will not make work a means of securing our lives against all possible calamities." He is not telling us not to work or to be lazy. But he says that work will "have a limited place in our lives" – it will not consume your entire day or week. You will not work at the expense of your family relationships and spiritual development. It would be foolish, according to God, to do otherwise.

Parable of the Shrewd Manager. Our next parable on wealth is found in Luke 16:1-13: "Jesus told his disciples: 'There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.' The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg – I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.' Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred'" (v. 1-7).

What is happening here? A rich man discovers that his manager was "wasting his possessions," and decides to dismiss him: "Give an account of your management, because

you cannot be manager any longer." But before this manager leaves, he summons all the people who owe the master, and reduces their debts to obtain their favor. He does this, reasoning with himself, that "when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses." Because he is doing these people favors, they will welcome him, and help him in return.

Jesus continues, "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money" (v. 8-13).

While the previous parable shows a type of financial planning that is selfish, destructive, and unspiritual, this parable reminds us that unbelievers are often wiser in their financial dealings relative to their own way of living compared to the people of God. Thus, verse 8 says, "For the people of this world are more shrewd *in dealing with their own kind* than are the people of the light." So, in this parable, Jesus illustrates some principles for the wise use of wealth.

In verses 1-8, Jesus is not telling Christians to follow the manager's dishonest practice, but to make the point that unbelievers are often wise in the use of wealth within the context of their own existence and way of living, which is in the temporal and fleshly world, while Christians often are foolish in their handling of money within the context of their own existence and way of living, which is, supposedly, the spiritual or eternal world. This is not the way it should be.

Invest in People. Beyond serving as a critique of the situation, this parable gives us several instructive principles, with the first being that we should use our wealth to invest in people. Jesus says in verse 9, "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves." This does not necessarily mean giving money to people, but that you should use your money in things that will benefit them.

The rich man in the previous parable invested all of his wealth on his own fleshly desires, and stored up what he could not use. God says that this is foolish. The manager in this parable knows how to use money, although the wealth was not his own, to create relationships with others.

When we give our money to further the preaching of the gospel and the maturity of Christians, we are using "worldly wealth" to help people, as opposed to using all of it in things that merely contribute to our amusement and comfort.

For example, a standard form of giving would be tithing to the church, or sending some money to a worthwhile Christian ministry. But something such as giving a Bible to a person who has just been saved would also be consistent with what we are advocating at this point. Another option is to purchase quality Christian teaching materials as gifts to your fellow believers. In all these instances, you are investing in the spiritual lives of people, using your "worldly wealth" in a way that creates an otherworldly impact. This, undoubtedly, is a wise use of money.

Invest in the Spiritual. As mentioned above, unspiritual planning is, ultimately, also unwise planning, even if it be wise according to the terms of this temporal world. On the other hand, the wisest use of wealth would always touch that which is spiritual.

Again, Jesus says, "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, *so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.*" Notice the difference between what Jesus says here, and what the manager said to himself: "I know what I'll do so that, *when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.*"

While this manager plans for his temporal life and welfare, Jesus says to plan for things that are spiritual. Use your wealth to benefit others in spiritual ways, and "you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." You will have friends when you get to heaven, in other words. The benefits that they will receive will endure beyond this life into eternity, and you will be rewarded for your contribution.

Invest in the Eternal. A truly wise person will seek to use his wealth in such a way as to create an eternal impact. Jesus concludes the parable by saying, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money" (v. 10-13).

No matter how much money passes through your hands in this life, it is "little" compared to what you may have in eternity, but "he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much," so "if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you?" (v. 11) Money is not true riches, but God has true riches reserved for you in heaven. But why should you be entrusted with true riches if you are not even faithful with earthly wealth?

These two parables are not only lessons in giving, but also remind us to examine our priorities in our thoughts and actions. For example, if you tithe to your church every month and give generously to Christian ministries, but if during the week you constantly think about how you may become richer more than how you may be more spiritual and pleasing to God, you are still being foolish. Anything other than God that binds the mind is an idol.

God is not against us having wealth, but he wants us to be obsessed only with him: "Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:27-32).

Remember the parable of the sower, where "the one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful" (Matthew 13:22).

6. PARABLES ON THE EXCLUSIVENESS OF SALVATION

Depending on how one defines a parable, not everyone will consider the two main passages discussed in this chapter as parables. The way the English word is usually used, a parable is a fictitious story that illustrates a moral or religious principle. However, when we hold to the definition of the Greek word, "*parabole*," from which the English word "parable" was derived, then we may certainly include the passages discussed in the following pages as parables – that is, we are using the word "parable" to mean "figure of speech," and not only an illustrative fictitious story.

This chapter discusses the exclusiveness of salvation. By that I mean the Christian faith asserts that there is only one way to be saved, and everyone who does not come through this way is excluded. The two parables that we will study show us that the way to God and heaven is not a wide path but a narrow one. In fact, this path is so narrow that there is only one way to be saved, and anyone who does not travel on this path is heading toward damnation.

Now, a philosophical assault on religious pluralism is beyond the scope of this book, although it would be tremendously helpful, especially given the unthinking tolerance for intellectual chaos and spiritual confusion of this present age. I encourage the reader to look into the weaknesses of religious pluralism and tolerance, perhaps through reading some of my other writings, or that of other writers. One book that deserves our attention is Mortimer Adler's *Truth in Religion*. Adler does not write from the perspective of a Christian apologist – he does not need to, since it is rather easy to demonstrate the absurdity of religious pluralism even apart from Christian presuppositions.

With the above in mind, we will direct our attention to what the Bible has to say concerning the exclusiveness of the Christian faith, and particularly basing our discussion on two parables, or figures of speech.

Even a cursory study will reveal, perhaps to the horror of even some professing Christians, that the Bible has no respect for all non-Christian religions – it denounces all of them as false, having their origins in the rebellious nature of man and the inspiration of demons. This is evident in various sections of the Bible, such as the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3), the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:20-46), and the writings of the apostle Paul (Romans 1:18-32).

Therefore, biblically speaking, the exclusivity of salvation is certain. However, in a discussion where not everyone submits to biblical authority, the use of philosophical arguments against religious pluralism founded on first principles apart from the Bible is both possible and desirable. If time permits, one may also argue first for the objective truths of Christianity, then proceed to refute religious pluralism with biblical authority already established.

In connection with the above, let us briefly examine Acts 4:8-12: "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: 'Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by *the name of Jesus Christ* of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.' *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*"

The Gate for the Sheep. "I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.' Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore Jesus said again, 'I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full'" (John 10:1-10).

I would like to direct your attention to verses 7-9, where the thought is conveyed to us that Jesus is "the gate for the sheep."

In those days, there were two kinds of sheepfolds. In the villages and towns, there were communal sheepfolds where all the village flocks were sheltered when they returned home at night. These folds were protected by a strong gate to which only the gatekeeper held the key. Verse 3 in this passage says, "The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."

There is a second kind of sheepfold. During the warmer seasons, a shepherd may take the sheep out to the hills and may not return at night. At such times, the sheep would be gathered into an open space with a wall surrounding it. Each of these sheepfolds had an opening through which the sheep may go in and come out. There was no physical gate or door. At night, the shepherd would lie down across the opening, and no sheep could go in or come out except over his body. Thus, the shepherd was literally the gate.

In the passage we have just read, Jesus states, "I am the gate for the sheep," and that "whoever enters through me will be saved." Correspondingly, he says in John 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Jesus excludes all other options for salvation in his statement. Apart from him, there is no "way" to God, for they are all false and lead to death. Those who reject Jesus Christ have

rejected salvation. And those who end up following others in the search for salvation are not God's sheep. They do not belong to God, and they will not be saved.

Jesus says in John 10:14, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me." If you belong to God, then you will know Jesus Christ and follow him as your shepherd. Some who follow others may say, "Are there not many ways to God?" The Bible's answer is in the negative. There is only one way to God and one way to salvation.

The Good Shepherd. There is a second point to be made out of this passage. Although it is not directly related to the exclusiveness of salvation, I still would like to discuss it since it is indeed worthy of our attention, and since we are already involved in studying this passage.

Jesus says in John 10:11, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Also, he says in verse 14, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me." So, Jesus is not only the gate of the sheepfold, but he also calls himself the "good shepherd."

To appreciate the implications of Jesus being our good shepherd, let us first look at verse 9, where Jesus says, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture." Notice the words, "come in and go out." To the Hebrews, the ability to go in and come out without troubles carries the idea of peace and security in life.

We find this often in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 28:1-2, 6 says, "If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God...You will be *blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.*" God was making a covenant with the nation of Israel in this passage, and he promised peace, security, and blessings to those who obey him.

In Numbers 27:15-18, we read, "Moses said to the LORD, 'May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to *go out and come in* before them, one who will *lead them out and bring them in*, so the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.' So the LORD said to Moses, 'Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand on him.'" Moses was about to pass away, and he asked God for a successor. He prayed, in effect, "Grant Israel a new leader, who will give them peace, security, structure, order, and victory." He was asking for a leader who would "go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in."

Then, we turn to Psalm 121, for our final illustration of this concept: "The LORD will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life; the LORD will *watch over your coming and going* both now and forevermore" (v. 7-8). If God's protection is upon a person, he will be able to "come in and go out" in peace, without problems or harassment.

Returning to our passage, Jesus is our gate and shepherd, so that we may "come in and go out, and find pasture" (v. 9). He not only brings us salvation from sin, but also peace, stability, security, and power: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

Many Christians, although they have received salvation through Jesus Christ, still do not have peace in this present life. They need to understand that Jesus is both the gate to our salvation and the shepherd of the flock. We can trust him, be led by him, and be at rest in him.

He says in Matthew 11:29-30, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Many Christians do not have rest; rather, they are quite troubled in their souls. They bear the burden of fear and guilt constantly. They need to see Jesus as their good shepherd. As the apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 2:25, "For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."

Although he is the good shepherd, Jesus has also chosen certain leaders from among Christians to watch over his flock. Ministers are as shepherds watching over the sheep that belong to Jesus Christ. Thus, Jesus is the "Chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4), and Christian ministers serve under him to watch over his people.

Paul says in Acts 20:28-32, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

Paul speaks of the Christians as sheep, and the ministers as "overseers" and "shepherds." He also mentions "savage wolves," saying, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and *distort the truth* in order to draw away disciples after them." In other words, even some professing Christians would, knowing or not, introduce false doctrines into the church. Paul prescribes the solution: "Now I commit you to God and to the *word of his grace*, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

The minister's responsibility, then, is to lead God's people, with teaching them the word of God and protecting them from false doctrines as a priority. Ministers must grasp this concept, so that they would know to feed the sheep with sound doctrinal preaching, and cease to give an inappropriate amount of attention to less important matters.

One main objective of the ministry is to help Christians reach maturity, so that they are no longer as "infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (Ephesians 4:14). Ministers are to "preaching the word" at all times regardless of the protests from those who have "itching ears," who only wish to hear things that "suit their own desires" (2 Timothy 4:2-3). God had said through Jeremiah the prophet that the "shepherds after [his] own heart" are those who "lead [God's people] with knowledge and understanding" (Jeremiah 3:15). There is no such thing as a competent Christian leader who does not emphasize doctrine.

The apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 5:1-4, "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away." The "Chief Shepherd" in verse 4 refers to Jesus Christ.

The Narrow Gate. Remember that our topic is the exclusiveness of salvation – that Jesus Christ is the only way to God and heaven. The next passage that we will study addresses the same issue, and it is found in Matthew 7:13-14, where Jesus says, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Once again, although this passage does not contain a story, it is a parable in the sense that Jesus speaks in a figure of speech. Two gates and two roads are used to represent the ways to salvation or destruction. The wide gate and road lead to destruction, while the narrow gate and road is the way that leads to life.

Salvation is Exclusive. Many accuse those who believe in the exclusiveness of salvation, which is in fact a biblical doctrine, as being narrow-minded. They even claim that Jesus was an open-minded person, and therefore Christians misrepresent him at times by being close-minded.

I would readily agree that Christians fail to represent the teachings and character of Jesus faithfully on various occasions, but insisting on the exclusiveness of salvation is certainly not one of these instances. As we have seen from several passages above, Jesus himself was extremely close-minded regarding this matter, in the sense that it is not subject to discussion or debate.

We only need to be open-minded about things of which we are not certain. But once we have settled upon the truth based on revelation, evidence, and sound reason, it would be foolish to still be open-minded about the matter. I am not open-minded about whether $2 + 2 = 4$. I am not open-minded about whether I have two hands and two feet. I am not trying to find out the truth about these things – I already know the truth about these things. And no Christian should be open-minded about whether Jesus Christ is the only

way to salvation. What is called open-mindedness is often nothing more than intellectual ignorance and moral cowardice.

1 Timothy 3:15 says that "the church of the living God" is the "pillar and foundation of the truth." Whereas many people consider the search for truth a worthy lifetime goal, Christians already know the truth.

Although we can always know more, we can base our learning on matters of which we are certain, such as the existence of God, the incarnation, divinity, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the final judgment, the infallibility of the Bible, and so forth. In this sense, we are not seekers of the truth, but students and defenders of the truth. We already know that the entire Bible is God's word and therefore must be completely true – we just have not learned all that is in it yet. Whereas being a "seeker" of truth implies that one has not even discovered the source of truth, which Christians understands to be God's word – "your word is truth," Jesus says (John 17:17).

In matters concerning salvation, Christians are possessors of the truth, and not seekers of the same. Non-Christians seek truth (or seek to suppress it when found; see Romans 1:18), and they will only find it in the Bible or through Christians who relate its contents.

Destruction is Inclusive. Salvation is exclusive – there is only one way to be saved. But the way to destruction is wide open. Open-mindedness can be positive in some situations, but in the matters of salvation and moral standards, it is the way of destruction.

This is precisely the way that many are heading today. They claim that enlightenment leads to open-mindedness – the more enlightened you are, the more open-minded you should be. But the Bible and sound reasoning teach us that enlightenment leads to narrow-mindedness. This is because the closer you are to the truth, the more options you will have excluded. In the matter of salvation, when you have come to the truth, you will have excluded every false way to salvation, and Jesus Christ is the only one who remains.

The word "narrow-minded" is, of course, often used in a derogatory manner, but I am using it here in a positive sense. "Narrow-mindedness" resulting from the study of Scripture and other available evidence is a sign of wisdom and precision, while uncritical open-mindedness is the mark of a fool. Open-mindedness is a mask behind which intellectual midgets hide. To say that a person is completely open-minded also means that he does not know anything. He has no information on the subject that will enable him to exclude options that are obviously false.

In any case, why do we need more than one way to salvation? Can we really say to God, "God, I want to be saved and be with you in heaven forever – but only on my terms!" Very few people may phrase their stance this way, but insistence on multiple ways to salvation in the light of biblical teaching to the contrary can only be translated into this arrogant demand. And with such an attitude, is it any wonder that they be damned from God's presence?

All evidence affirms the divine authority of Scripture, and it is in there that we are taught the exclusiveness of salvation. To oppose it, then, is to dictate the terms of salvation to God, which we do not have the authority to do.

7. PARABLES ON SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

Self-righteousness is a relevant topic – many people have this attitude but are not aware of it. A self-righteous person does not necessarily exhibit proud mannerisms or look down on others in obvious ways, although for some it may mean that. The physical appearance or behavior of a person does not always betray his self-righteousness.

A person may act confident, and as a result may seem arrogant in the eyes of others, but he may in fact be a humble person within. Although it is wrong to say that there is no correlation between one's inward condition and physical behavior, for sure we should not judge a person by his physical appearance and mannerisms alone. In any case, one who is apparently arrogant may in fact be humble, and vice versa.

Luke seems to favor this topic. In his gospel, there are recorded passages where Jesus challenged the unjustified security of those who are confident in their own righteousness. For example, Luke 13:1-5 says, "Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.'"

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Our first parable on the subject is taken from Luke 18:9-14: "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.'"

First, note that this passage does not teach the idea, popular in many circles, that we should not "judge" people, in the sense that we should form no opinion of others whatsoever, even when we have the word of God as the basis for making an evaluation. The Bible's instructions on not "judging" other people does not imply that we should suppress our discernment. In fact, the Bible says, "The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment" (1 Corinthians 2:15), and "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

Making accurate evaluations of others is not to be misunderstood as a mark of self-righteousness. In fact, Jesus teaches us to, "Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment" (John 7:24). Rather, according to this parable, those who are self-righteous are "confident of their own righteousness and [look] down on everybody else" (v. 9). Based on what the Bible tells us concerning the human condition, especially before regeneration, self-righteous individuals are therefore self-deceived. They fail to see that they are in the same wretched condition, and are just as much in need of God's mercy, as those whom they despise.

The NASB translates this verse saying that these people "*trusted in themselves* that they were righteous," and that is the problem. Where does their so-called righteousness come from? From themselves. While the Bible says, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away" (Isaiah 64:6), and that, "there is no one who does good, not even one" (Romans 3:12), self-righteous individuals are blinded to the point of seeing themselves as exceptions to the universality of sin among humankind. The truth is that we are not righteous in ourselves, and all of us are in need of salvation through some external means. The answer is not in us. A self-righteous man does not only look down on others, but he does so without good reason. That is, one who depends on his own righteousness as a basis of thinking himself superior to another is deceived.

Verses 11-12 say, "The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'" Have you ever thanked God that you are not like other people? Here, the Pharisee mentions, "robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even...this tax collector." He is saying to God, "I thank you that I am not unrighteous like other people. I am not an adulterer, nor am I a murderer." Then, he points to a specific example, a tax collector, and says, "I thank God that I am not like him."

Now, if you are a Christian and is depending on the merits of Christ as the basis of your claim to being righteous before God, then of course you should be grateful that you are not like others who have not been saved like you. But this is not a claim to inherent superiority as the Pharisee is doing here. If your confidence before God is based on your own positive evaluation of yourself, or on your evaluation of your superiority over others, then you are deceived, and the words of Christ would apply to you: "Unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:3). One who seems to be righteous outwardly, but on whom God has not imputed the righteousness of Christ, will ultimately suffer the same fate as the evidently unrighteous – robbers, adulterers, and murderers. This is the point that the Pharisee fails to grasp.

He says, "I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get" (v. 12). Fasting and tithing are certainly good works. But a self-righteous person depends on these to justify him before God. And that simply will not do.

Jesus explains in verse 14, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." A self-righteous person exalts himself. He does not wait for the approval of God, but he readily lifts up himself before God and others.

Whenever he comes into contact with people, he immediately tries to bring out all his credentials and mentions all the good works he has done. But Jesus teaches us, "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:2-4).

On the other hand, Jesus says concerning the tax collector, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God" (v. 14). The words, "the other" refer to the Pharisee, and "this man" refer to the tax collector. The parable ends with an element of surprise for the hearers, especially for the first century Jewish audience – it is the tax collector who was justified, and not the Pharisee, who had performed numerous good works.

What is the difference between them? Verse 13 says, "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" He faces the truth about himself. He knows exactly what he is – a sinner in need of God's mercy.

Before we repent and receive the only solution to our sin, Jesus Christ, we were all sinners. The Pharisee does not realize that, but the tax collector does. If you want to attain true righteousness, you need to face the truth about yourself. Not only does the tax collector face the truth about himself, but he also discerns the real solution. That is, instead of promising God that he would be a better person, he says, "God, *have mercy* on me, a sinner." The only antidote to sin is God's mercy, and not moral reformation based on our own will or effort.

The debt of sin is too great for any of us to pay. The tax collector has this valuable insight and acts accordingly. Rather than promising to pay the debt, which is impossible, he pleads for mercy, of which God has plenty: "For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee" (Psalm 86:5, KJV). Thus, when coming to God, we must first see our true condition, and then depend on God's mercy alone. There is no other way.

As mentioned, there is often an element of surprise in the parables of Jesus. He says in verse 10, "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." When Jesus mentioned the "Pharisee" and the "tax collector" at the beginning of this parable, the audience may have immediately determined in their minds who was righteous and who was unrighteous. The "Pharisee" was almost by definition a righteous man, and the opposite was true with the tax collector. However, Jesus contradicted their normal way of thinking and emphasized through this parable that it is not who you are or

which group you belong to that makes you righteous, but it is the basis of your righteousness that makes the difference. True righteousness can only come from a complete dependence on God's mercy.

Likewise, the fact that you may have come from an orthodox religious background, a Christian family, or that you have done many charitable deeds does not mean that you are righteous. As long as the basis of your righteousness remains in yourself, it will be unacceptable to God.

Are you measuring God's favor toward you based on how much you pray each day, how much money you give to your church, or how many people you have converted to Christ? Or, are you depending on God's mercy *alone* for your justification before God?

Parable of the Wedding Feast. The words of Luke 18:14, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted," appropriately lead us into our next parable, which is recorded in Luke 14:7-11: "When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: 'When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.'"

Although it may still be true in a sense today, it is even more so in those days that there are places of honor in a wedding feast. Jesus noticed that some people were picking out the places of honor for themselves. The reason they did that was because they thought highly of themselves.

To counter this type of behavior resulting from pride in the people's hearts, Jesus told this parable, instructing his audience that true honor is to be given and not taken. This is especially true in the kingdom of God. You do not take honor, but you wait for it to be given to you.

Instead of picking the seat of the place of honor, sit at the lowest place: "But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests." Rather than going through the embarrassment of having the honor that you have inappropriately assumed taken away from you, you should take a low position for yourself, and let another promote you instead.

The Church needs to hear this message today. We expect selfishness and self-exaltation from the secular world, but the same attitudes and behavior that control them have infiltrated many congregations. Even ministers "network" with others, not to provide greater service, but to multiply "connections" that would bring them fame and financial

gain. There are even preachers who call themselves "apostles" and seek to govern churches in entire regions – the problem is that they barely know enough of the Bible to teach children's class.

Jesus taught his disciples, saying, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:25-28). Faithful ministers are indeed "first," but this is because God has given them the authority to serve his people and promote his cause, and not to increase their own fleshly comfort by demanding others to serve them.

Many people do not live up to the place of honor that they would like to have, or have already claimed for themselves. For example, some may want to be respected as a preacher or theologian among Christians, but they do not study the Bible or teach God's word faithfully.

If anyone deserves honor, it would be Jesus Christ. But even he said that he did not honor himself, but he sought the honor that comes from God the Father. In John 5:44, he says, "How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?" And then, in John 8:54, he says, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me." True honor comes from God, not man.

This parable concludes the same way that our previous parable does. Verse 11 says, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." This is the general principle: "He who humbles himself will be exalted." So, push yourself down a little. Keep a low profile. Do not advertise to everyone how spiritual or deserving of respect you are. I am not saying that you should hide your achievements, or deliberately make yourself look worse in front of people. The point is not to boast of your achievement, or to gain honor through some other fleshly means.

It is fine to admit to certain good points about yourself if they are true. It is fine to receive recognition for work done in a company. In a working environment, if you achieved something, then you should get the credit for it. But I am addressing your personality. Do you desperately seek praise and honor from people, but is relatively indifferent about whether your life pleases God?

The King James Version contains the word "vainglory" in several places, meaning empty honor. Vainglory is indeed honor, but it is "empty" and void of true meaning. Some people would do anything to get some recognition, but from whom does the recognition come? Is it meaningful to receive honor from them? Usually not. And when it does not mean anything, it is empty honor.

The apostle Paul says in Phillipians 2:3, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." The KJV renders "vain conceit" as "vainglory," or empty honor. Let us read it this way: "Do nothing out of selfishness, or empty honor, but with a humble attitude consider others as better than yourselves." This is difficult for some people to do – to lift up others, and to put down themselves.

There is a false humility, where one's pride is actually hidden in his often putting himself down. True humility does not deny the facts – that is, you may admit to possessing certain talents (and even those are the gifts of God), but you are simply not obnoxious about them, always flaunting them in front of others, desiring to receive recognition and praise from them. Do not try to get the spotlight all the time.

The Bible says, "No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man. But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another" (Psalm 75:6-7). Trust God for your promotion. God will put you in the right place at the right time. God will bring you together with the right people. He will fulfill his plan for your life. Trusting God for our promotion may demand patience. Most of us would like to be promoted sooner than when it actually happens. But we must understand that God will never deceive us, and he will fulfill his promises and plans in our lives.

When discussing the subject of exaltation and honor, an even more crucial issue is whether we are honoring God. We should honor him in our thoughts, conversation, and lifestyle. God plainly says in 1 Samuel 2:30, "Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained."

Do we honor him in our daily conversation? Do we give him thanks, or do we constantly complain against him? Do we defend his honor publicly against the blasphemies of non-Christians? Are we zealous for his honor? Do we think good thoughts about him? Psalm 19:14 says, "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer."

In summary, the self-righteous person honors himself. But in the end, he receives only empty honor from man, which is meaningless. True honor, on the other hand, only comes through a complete reliance on God. In addition, we are not to honor ourselves, but to focus our efforts on honoring God, and God will honor us at the proper time: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:6).

Self-righteousness is, at least partly, a result of spiritual blindness – the inability to see one's inherent wretchedness. May God open our eyes to see our true condition, so that we may despair of our own efforts and depend on his mercy alone!

8. PARABLES ON OUR SPIRITUAL DUTIES

Every Christian is called to work for God. The first of the two parables that we will discuss should be familiar to most Christians. It is one that deals with the problem of how some fail to render the service that rightfully belongs to God. The second parable corrects an attitude that is prevalent even in many Christians, namely, that somehow God is our servant and we are his master, and that whatever service we offer God are as favors to him that demands to be rewarded.

In these parables, the unbiblical exalted view of man in relation to God is corrected, and we are reminded of his mastery and ownership over us. In addition, the Christian life carries responsibilities that every Christian may perform. And failure to do so is a sign of spiritual defect and defiance against our master.

Parable of the Talents. Our first parable comes from Matthew 25:14-30: "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. 'Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

The Measure of Faith. Each person in the body of Christ has been given a different type and level of grace or gift. Verse 15 says, "To one he gave five talents of money, to

another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey."

In an attempt to encourage Christians and to present God as just, some ministers teach that each Christian has been given the same level and measure of faith, grace, and spiritual gifts. It is true, according to them, that we may be given different types of gifts, but we have been given the same *amount* of grace and faith. They even make it explicit that this also applies to Christians who are called to lead God's people; that is, they are not given more grace than those who are not called to the ministry. Supposedly, this assertion is made in defense of, and to be consistent with, the biblical teaching that, "God does not show favoritism" (Romans 2:11).

However, the above is simply not true. In this parable, Jesus says that in "the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 25:1), one may be given "five talents," while another may be given two, and yet another only one. Evidently, this is not a sign of favoritism. Do we not understand that none of us deserves even one "talent"? As a character in another parable says, "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:15). Paul writes that, "God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Corinthians 12:18). Our place in the body of Christ is not subject to our choice.

In Romans 12:6, Paul says, "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith." This verse says that we have "different gifts, according to the grace given us," indicating that the grace given to us determines our gifts, and that the grace given us differ. A teacher has not been given the grace of an apostle, and a music minister does not possess the grace of a theologian.

The verse continues with a piece of instruction concerning prophecy, which for our purposes serves to illustrate how spiritual gifts may differ not only in kind but also in strength. Paul says that one who has the gift of prophecy should exercise the same according to the "proportion" of "his faith," implying that he may not use the gift to the extent that exceeds his faith.

Thus, grace determines the kind of gifts that one has, while one's proportion of faith sets the boundaries of their use. Yet, even the faith is "not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). Our faith is a "faith that comes through him" (Acts 3:16). Nevertheless, one's faith can increase, and as it does, he moves to a higher level of liberty and power within the type of grace that God has given him.

With this in mind, let us read Romans 12:3, where it says, "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you."

Notice that the "measure of faith" for ministry is given by God. Both the KJV and the NIV translate the phrase as "*the* measure of faith," thus giving some the idea that

everyone has been given the same amount. While the concept of differing measures of faith may be understood by the reader in the English sentence structure of the NIV, "the measure of faith God has *given you*," one can hardly do the same with the KJV, which says, "God hath *dealt to every man* the measure of faith." However, the word "the" is absent from the original Greek text; therefore, the rendering of the NASB, "*a* measure of faith" would be a more correct translation.

Professor Everett F. Harrison agrees with this interpretation, saying, "Is there some gauge that will enable a person to estimate his position with respect to spiritual gifts? Paul answers in the affirmative, pointing to 'the measure of faith'...Godet understands 'measure' in the sense of degree. 'This gift, the measure of the action to which we are called, is the divine limit which the Christian's renewed mind should discern, and by which he should regulate his aspirations in regard to the part he has to play in the church'...faith, as used in this passage...[is] faith in the sense of grasping the nature of one's spiritual gift and having confidence to exercise it rightly" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 10; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976; p. 129).

This is only fair if one takes time to think about it. It is not correct to assume that everyone must be given the same amount of faith and grace for God to be just, since he has also called Christians to perform tasks of differing levels of difficulty. One who is called to an international television and radio ministry needs much more faith and grace than a Christian who lives what seems to be an uneventful life. It would be unfair, in fact, to give the one who is called to accomplish a difficult task the same measure of grace given to one who is called to fulfill a relatively small responsibility.

This is certainly not to say that God's estimation of a person is based on one's ministry and accomplishments, since our ability comes from him in the first place. My point is that we cannot ignore the fact that some Christians have been given more faith and grace, at least in the area of ministry, than others. The apostle Paul required, and was given, more grace in the ministry than a church usher working in relative comfort in the United States. Martin Luther, with all the opposition he had to face, required, and was given, more grace than the average pastor living today.

Ministers need not deny this biblical teaching in order to encourage believers to serve or preach the gospel. Instead of telling them that everyone has been given the same level of faith and grace, we should remind Christians that each has been given *some* measure of grace, and they are responsible to use it to render the proper service to God. In addition, we are not denying that one may grow in faith. A Christian is never limited to the level of faith and grace that he has been given initially. In 2 Thessalonians, Paul thanks God that his readers' "faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing."

On the other hand, even one who has been given an abundance of spiritual gifts may neglect them, and thus we are commanded to "fan into flame the gift of God" (2 Timothy 1:6) so that our ministries may operate as God intends.

God is not unfair, and it is up to him how he distributes his gifts. The biblical teaching that he does not show favoritism means that he is not moved by the status and characteristics of a person, such as wealth, appearance, social class, and political influence.

You will be responsible for the grace that God has given you. Notice that verse 15 says the master gave to his servants "each according to his ability." If he had given five talents to the one who could manage only two, and then still hold him accountable for five talents, then it would indeed be unfair. Of course, the analogy breaks down when you inquire of the cause of their differing ability, since that comes from God also. In any case, the point is that one must responsibly manage what he has been given, and those who have been given less are also responsible for less, that is, in the area of ministry. In the area of personal Christian living, all of us are commanded to "Be perfect...as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

In connection with this, Jesus also says in Luke 12:48, "But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."

But then, one may ask, would it not be unfair for God to give us more grace, since we will be responsible for our use of it? The answer is that since he has given you more, it will also be easier for you to do more. In other words, each one is given the grace to do what he has been called to do. The grace matches the task; therefore, once again, there is no injustice in God.

If a nation demands a ten percent tax from one who has earned ten dollars, and fifty percent from one who has earned a hundred, the former needs to pay only one dollar, while the latter must pay fifty. However, it is easier for the latter to pay the fifty dollars than for the former to pay one, since the one who begins with a hundred would still have fifty dollars remaining afterward. This analogy, of course, creates another inequality, where one ends up with fifty dollars while the other only has nine left. But the analogy is simply to illustrate that demanding more from one who has been given more would not make the situation especially difficult or unfair to the person. Further, the Bible teaches that we will be given more as we are faithful with what we already have.

Utilization of Spiritual Gifts. It is important to understand the type and nature of our spiritual gifts, since God requires us to contribute to his cause through their use. This brings us to our next point, that God has given each Christian spiritual gifts so that he may interact with the world using them. Verse 16 of the passage under discussion says, "The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more." Notice that this person went and "put his money to work," and that he began to do it "at once."

When I say that we should interact with this world using our spiritual gifts, I have two specific elements in mind, and they are listed in 1 Peter 4:10-11: "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen." We are to use our spiritual gifts to "serve others," to the end that "in all things God may be praised."

This passage indicates that whatever gifts you have been given, you are to use the same gifts to interact with this world. If you have been given a hammer, do not try to saw wood with it, but put your hammer to proper use by hammering in a nail instead. Likewise, if you have been given the gift of teaching, teach. Do not try to be a music minister. As you "put your money (spiritual gifts) to work," you will be serving others correctly, and you will be bringing glory of God.

As we interact with this world with our gifts, our relationship with it will be increasingly defined by them. And since God is the one who has decided what kinds of gifts to give us, this means that our relationship with this world can only be correctly defined as we use the gifts that God has given us to interact with it.

Take a look at 1 Peter 4:10-11 again: "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God." If God has gifted you to be a preacher, and you are faithfully exercising your gift, you will be correctly recognized as a preacher. If you stand up behind the pulpit to preach every week, people will not mistake you as a music minister, an accountant, or a politician! But if you play the organ or the guitar before the congregation every week without preaching, you will not be recognized as a preacher, but a music minister. It is the will of God that you be recognized and defined by the world through your spiritual gifts, for God has also defined you this way. It is the identity that God wishes you to have, and others are simply recognizing what God has decided.

Of course, a music minister, as well as any Christian, may at times be called upon to teach or perform other duties. There is no problem with that. The Bible instructs every Christian to preach the gospel and instruct others. However, if you pretend to function in a ministry office that God has not offered you, you will be falsely defined in this world. Only when you function according to the way God has designed you will you be correctly serving others, bringing glory to God, and correctly defined both in the Church and in the world. And as mentioned, your spiritual gifts will increase as you use them. Verses 16-17 in our passage say, "The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more."

In addition, what we do with our spiritual gifts will have eternal ramifications: "After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man

who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'" (v. 19-21).

Paul writes to Timothy, saying, "For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance" (1 Timothy 4:8-9). Our attention should be always focused on spiritual things, since they affect both our present life and the life to come. The use of our spiritual gifts is certainly no small matter.

Finally, this parable teaches us that fear and laziness are two things that prevent one from using his gifts to interact with the world. Verse 18 says, "But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money." Later, he explains to his master, saying, "I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you" (v. 25).

Although it seems that he has lost nothing, his master's response is far from favorable: "His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents.'"

Although this person was afraid, he did not even do the minimum. As the master observes, he "should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have receive it back with interest" – but he did not even do that. Thus, the master discerns another cause of his lack of productivity, calling him a "lazy" servant.

Likewise, God has no high opinion of those who hide their gifts. We must understand that God's grace is not cheap or common, but of high quality and value. Therefore, if God has entrusted to you something as priceless as his Spirit, grace, and power, it would indeed be "wicked" (v. 26) to hide them.

It is the one who has been given the fewest talents and responsibilities that fails to perform in this parable. The situation is often the same in our churches. Those who are given multiple spiritual gifts (and therefore more responsibilities) are often functional within the church, since their divine abilities overflow and become obvious to all, while those who have fewer gifts often retreat into passivity, when they have the same duty to God and their fellow Christians to contribute what God has given them. But let us not excuse anyone with this, since this parable also indicates that fear and laziness are often the reasons for their lack of initiative.

Parable of the "Unworthy Servants." Our second parable is not one that may be defined as such by everyone. However, since Jesus uses a figure of speech to teach a lesson relevant to our topic, it is fitting to include it here: "Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in

from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" (Luke 17:7-10).

As I have previously noted, when Jesus designates certain words or actions to a character in a parable, it does not necessarily mean that the person represented is as the character, or that one should follow the example of the character. The characters in the parables may be used as comparisons or contrasts to those they seem to represent.

However, in this passage, Jesus speaks directly to the disciples and instructs them on what to say: "*So you also*, when you have done everything you were told to do, *should say*, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" (v. 10). Verse 10 is a commentary on the parable immediately preceding it, and it is not a figure of speech in itself. In it, Jesus plainly tells us what to say to God and what our attitude toward him should be as a result of the lesson taught in the parable. In other words, verse 10 should be understood literally and applied to Christians.

Now, let us briefly examine the parable to see the reasoning Jesus uses to lead up to what he says in verse 10.

Verse 7 says, "Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'?" The master does not owe the slave any kindness just because the latter has performed his duties. And verse 8 continues, "Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'?" Even after having done a whole day's work, the master would still say to the slave, "Serve me."

Then, Jesus asks rhetorically, "Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?" (v. 9) – certainly not. By virtue of the fact that one is the master and the other is the slave, the former does not have to be kind or grateful to the slave for rendering his service and performing his duties. The master is not obligated to offer any special commendation, or even a word of thanks, to a slave who has done what he is supposed to do in the first place.

How strongly this goes against many Christians' thinking! They think that because they have served God in the forms of prayer, preaching, hospitality, generosity in giving, and so forth, that God now owes them favors. In a human relationship, such as one between two friends, it is only right for one to "return the favor" when he has received assistance from his friend. It is correct to be grateful to one who has treated you kindly. We feel obligated to help those who have helped us.

Somehow, we have pulled God down on to our level and made him one of us. We unconsciously assume that God owes us after we have rendered him service. Many have

forgotten that he does not *owe* us – he *owns* us! They have so focused on their sonship in Christ, a gift that God has freely given his elect, that they have ignored entirely biblical passages that refer to us as servants and slaves, as well as passages declaring God's total ownership over us, such as 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, which says, "You are not your own; you were bought at a price."

Jesus concludes the parable, saying, "*So you also*, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" (v. 10). Verses 7-9 discuss the relationship between a master and a slave; yet, Jesus indicates that it has application to his disciples, and thus he says, "so you also."

Again, some Christians may find it unusual or even feel uncomfortable when our relationship with God is illustrated by that of a master and slave relationship. This is due to an imbalance on the part of many ministers and Christians, who emphasize solely the, at least what seems to be, warm and sentimental aspects of our relationship with God. It is true that we as Christians are sons of God, but those passages that view us as slaves of Christ carry just as much divine authority as those describing our sonship. I urge Christians to bring back a consciousness of their being the slaves of God, who owes them nothing. Any act of kindness from God is solely due to his mercy offered through the covenant we have with him in Christ, and never as obligatory payments for our services.

A consciousness of our being slaves of Christ humbles us, but it does not mean that we go through life with our heads down – depressed and afraid. This is a false portrayal of a life of humility and service.

A person who understands that he is a slave of God becomes fearless in life, because he does not belong to himself. His confidence rests on his master, since he has none of his own. If you can truly see yourself as a slave of God, you can overcome your flesh, your emotions, and any disobedience and rebellion in your heart. Fear melts away since self-preservation is no longer a priority. We cease to fear for our own safety or welfare, since we do not even belong to ourselves.

Following a point that I have already mentioned, gratitude should be given, and not taken or demanded from God. It is wrong for Christians to say that they have sacrificed and worked so much for God as to deserve some sort of compensation – as if they have done more than they should.

As much grace as we have preached, and as much grace as Paul, the apostles, and the prophets have written about in the Bible, Christians still depend on their good works when they relate to God. They still cite their good works and various merits in prayer, thinking that these would make a difference. Most of the time their good works do not amount to much anyway. No matter how much genuine good you have done, you have done only that which you ought to have done.

Just pray! Just ask! If you were to depend on what you have done for God in order for him to answer your prayer, you will not stand a chance. God will hear your prayer based on his mercy, kindness, and his faithfulness to the promises given to you through Christ.

With the above in mind, let us gain further insight into our master and slave relationship with God from another passage, Luke 12:35-38: "Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night."

Verse 37 says, "It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them." In this passage, the master is said to serve his slaves (note that the word translated "servant" in the NIV is more correctly translated "slave" in the NASB). However, it does not contradict what we have just read from Luke 17.

The parable in Luke 17 emphasizes that it is not required of a master to show special kindness to the slave, and the slave in turn has no claim on the master's gratitude. This idea is applied to us with Jesus telling us to say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty" (Luke 17:10). This final verse in the parable tells us what our attitude, as slaves, should be.

On the other hand, Luke 12:37 reveals to us that God's kindness is beyond that of an ordinary human master, and that he in fact rewards and "serves" those who are faithful to him. Since our tendency is to emphasize and abuse the kindness of God, we must remind ourselves not to take God for granted as a result of our knowledge of his great mercy. We should still see ourselves as "unworthy servants." God's kindness is such that when he finds you in a posture of humility, he will "lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:6), but this is not something we do for ourselves, and especially not in our relationship with God. Foolish is the Christian who lifts himself up before God and makes demands of him!

So, Luke 17:10 tells you what your attitude should be, while Luke 12:37 tells us what God's attitude will be – that he will show us mercy, even though it is not required of him as our master.

God would be entirely righteous if he were to treat us like slaves, but the Bible says he treats us as sons, having adopted us in Christ. Any amount of work that slaves do should be taken for granted and not rewarded, but God rewards us as if we are not slaves. Nevertheless, besides holding on the other identities that the Bible says belong to us Christians (such as sonship), we should always have the humility of a slave; that is, we are not to take God for granted. Anything good that God does for us is not out of obligation or debt, but His kindness.

Let me conclude this important chapter with several relevant passages from the Bible. "He who has ears, let him hear" – so listen, read, and understand:

"Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: 'Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone – while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?'" (Job 38:1-7).

"The LORD said to Job: 'Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!' Then Job answered the LORD: 'I am unworthy – how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer – twice, but I will say no more.' Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm: 'Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his?'" (Job 40:1-9).

This is a good thing for many people to do: "I put my hand over my mouth." In connection with this, the Bible also says, "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few" (Ecclesiastes 5:1-2).

Many Christians complain when they are displeased with their own lives, even if the issue is minor. Often, they directly or indirectly question God's justice and his way of doing things. But God says, "Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me *to justify yourself?*"

"Then Job replied to the LORD: 'I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and *repent in dust and ashes*'" (Job 42:1-6). Repentance is the only proper attitude we should have given our constant defiance against God. "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (v. 5) – those who do not fear God, have not "seen" God. They do not know what he is truly like, nor the extent of his power and his holiness.

"But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make

the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?" (Romans 9:20-24).

"For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you" (Romans 12:3).

"But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:6-7).

"Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained" (1 Samuel 2:30).

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11).

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise" (Psalm 111:10).

If the fear of God is the *beginning* of wisdom, then those who challenge, question, and demand from God are fools; yet, how many Christians do these things? How often do *you* do these things? How many of us do not fear God, but dare to challenge and disobey him as if we are on the same level with him?

Christians, listen and understand: a slave who disrespects his master will be put down, but a slave who understands his place will be shown mercy. Are those of us who are under the new covenant, who has the Spirit of God within us, still so dull that we require an experience such as Job's to learn?

Jesus says in another context, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31). We do not need an experience like Job's, but all we need to do is to believe what the Scripture says about God and about us.

May we learn to humble ourselves so that we will not be put down, but rather be lifted up and honored by God.

9. ON HEARING THE WORD

I would like to conclude this book with several additional observations on hearing the word of God, since learning how to hear God's word properly is the key to understanding the parables of Jesus as well as the rest of Scripture.

Before continuing, I need to point out that whatever is said concerning hearing in such a context also applies to reading. Some have the idea that since the Bible says, "faith comes from hearing" (Romans 10:17), it does not come from reading. This is manifestly false. Of course the apostle Paul would focus on hearing and not reading, since most believers at that time did not have their own copy of the Scriptures.

The point is that God communicates to us through words, and when we hear or read those words, we intellectually grasp the content conveyed through them. When these words are received with the right attitude, they will produce the corresponding results in our lives. It would be ridiculous to assert that one can never come to Christ (since he cannot gain faith) through reading the Bible silently, but can do so when the Bible is read to him, or if he reads the Bible aloud so that he may hear the words. Anyone who hears or reads the words of Scripture and assents to their truth has faith.

Now, the Bible, which is the word of God, consists of words. If you do not know how to hear words correctly, how can you understand any part of the Scripture? Failure to hear the word of God correctly may be attributed to at least two reasons – intellectual distortion or moral distortion.

Learning the principles of biblical hermeneutics helps prevent intellectual distortion when reading or hearing the words of Scripture. Biblical interpretation is not a subjective exercise as many modern Christians assume, but there are definite rules that one must follow, of which observing the context of the passage is one example. A detailed discussion of these principles is beyond the scope and intent of this book. So, for the rest of this chapter, we will discuss several positive qualities in a person that would help prevent moral distortion. The opposite of these qualities are flaws in one's personality that obscure even the plain meaning of the words of Scripture from one's understanding, or in some other ways, render them ineffective in the hearer's life.

Be Humble. The apostle James says, "Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." (James 1:21). The Bible contains many passages that can hurt a person's pride, thus inducing resistance in the arrogant individual. As Stephen says in Acts 7:51 to a number of Jewish leaders, "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!"

When we hear the word of God, our weaknesses and sins are exposed. Flaws that we would like to suppress from our consciousness are made plain to our minds. The Bible explains that no one can hide from God and his word: "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:12-13).

However, the word of God reveals our inner condition not to embarrass us, but so that we may see ourselves clearly and proceed to make any needed changes. The penetrating power of God's word is not to be perceived as a threat, but a gift from God.

You can tell that a person is humble if, over the years, he is constantly being changed and improved through hearing the word of God. Do not mistake a downcast facial expression and constant self-degradation as humility – if a person refuses to submit to God's word and make the appropriate changes, he is still arrogant at his core.

Be Honest. James continues to say, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (v. 22). A person who refuses to act on the word of God is self-deceived. We need to be honest with God and with ourselves.

Many of us may not wish to be reminded of our weaknesses and shortcomings, and we may feel uncomfortable when these are brought to our attention. But we need to be honest about our actual condition. If the flaws are there, we must acknowledge them, and remove them.

The person who hears the word of God, but refuses to do what he hears, is self-deceived. Often, without having given the issue much thought, the person believes that he has already done what God's word requires since he has heard it and agreed with it. One may hear the word of God being taught, agree with it, and feel good about himself because he agrees with what he hears. But then, this person may fail to take the next step in implementing what he has heard in his own thoughts and actions.

In a sense, then, he does not fully agree with what he has heard, since God's word carries with it the implicit demand for obedience. In other words, any biblical doctrine carries with it the implication that you should do what it says, and a failure to act upon it shows that one does not agree with at least that part of the doctrine. True and complete intellectual assent to a biblical proposition logically implies obedience. A fuller explanation of this belongs to another topic of study, and so I will not dwell on it at this point (see Gordon H. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith*; Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1990).

I may teach on giving and generosity, and you may seemingly acknowledge what I say as biblical, and as a result feel good about yourself. You may feel generous already after having heard the sermon, but you have not given anything to anyone yet! If that is as far as you will go with what you have heard, then you have deceived yourself.

Verses 23-24 proceed to say, "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like."

The act of hearing the word is likened to looking into a mirror. As mentioned, listening to God's word will expose your true condition, part of which may include a number of flaws and weaknesses in your spiritual life. Hearing the word will show you what you have been doing right and what you have been doing wrong. You may be corrected, rebuked, and encouraged by what you hear all on the same occasion (2 Timothy 4:2).

If you begin with the assumption that you have blond hair, but see that your hair is in fact black when looking into a mirror, the reasonable response would be to modify your belief according to what you see in the mirror, since the mirror shows you your true appearance. Likewise, your beliefs about your spiritual condition should be adjusted according to what God's word shows you about yourself. The word of God will never provide you with a distorted image of the truth: "For the word of the LORD is right and true" (Psalm 33:4), and "All [of God's] words are true" (Psalm 119:160).

This man in verses 23-24 is said to have looked into the mirror, but "after looking at himself, [he] goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." This is the man who "listens to the word but does not do what it says." For once, he has seen his true condition, but because he does not immediately proceed to respond to what he has seen, he quickly forgets what he looks like. It is as if he has never looked into the mirror.

On the other hand, "the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does" (v. 25).

The word of God is the "law that gives freedom" – it will set you free. You need to look at yourself through the word of God, acknowledge and remember what you have seen, and remove the blemishes from your life.

Pay Attention. Notice the word "intently" in verse 25. James says that the one who not merely listens to God's word, but proceeds to do it, is also one who "looks *intently* into the perfect law that gives freedom."

You must pay attention to what you are hearing. You need to listen actively and with much concentration as you hear the word of God. Do not assume that you have improved just because you were there when the pastor preached the sermon. You need to pay attention to what he says.

I will not press the issue here, since I have already done so in other places, but the formal study of God's word, or theology, is a necessary discipline if one were to reap the most benefits from the Scripture. James says to look "intently" into the word of God, not just

casually, or as many would like to call it, devotionally. Vigorous research and prolonged reflection are necessary in the serious study of God's word.

Use Repetition. We will turn to 2 Peter 1:12-13 for our final point: "So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body."

This passage is saying that even though you have heard certain types of teaching, you must repeatedly review and gain additional depths on those topics. You must seek to gain the maximum benefits from the Scriptures through constant repetition.

Conclusion. The apostle Paul writes in Colossians 3:10 that we are to be "renewed in knowledge." Spiritual renewal does not mainly come through mystical experiences, visions, prophecies, worship, or prayer, but it comes through "knowledge."

The more knowledge you have from the Bible, the better you know the mind of God. We study both to receive the knowledge that God has given us through the Scriptures, and also so that the knowledge may change us, and causes us to conform to the will of God. Thus, Paul writes, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2).

Christians everywhere desire to know God's will; yet, most of them are anti-intellectual. They refuse to develop their minds with God's word, but expect the Holy Spirit to reveal God's will to them through mystical experiences. To them, the Bible does not seem personal or specific enough. However, this verse says it is through the renewing of our minds that we will know God's "perfect will." I am not against legitimate supernatural experiences, but we should take seriously the sufficiency of the Scripture, that it is able to show us even God's "perfect will," and that it is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).