



Week 3 – When Jesus Speaks: Studying His Parables

Fresh eyes on Jesus' parables: discovering new insights in familiar passages. Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook.

Spend Your Summer Listening: When Jesus Speaks

Join the Wednesday Night Crew as we study the words of Jesus to figure out how to actually live them. Until we get to meet face to face, will we be Livestreaming our “Chew On This” podcast on Wednesday Nights @ 6:30PM on Facebook (Maranatha Forest Lake) and Youtube. Links available www.realchurch.org

Thank you for joining us here LIVE in the WAJC radio station.

You can listen to WAJC at 88.1 or 91.7 or at Realiferradio.fm or search WAJC in the TuneIn App on your phone

Intro

We welcome you to this special live stream experience of Chew On This.

You are about to enter a discussion on how to actually live out faith in Christ.

Living it out loud within our messy lives. The content of this discussion comes from The Pastoral Preaching notes and this live, small group discussion these notes will prompt here tonight. Something we call: A Community Based Learning Experience. Come, Chew On This with us.

Opening Question(s): [Pertains to Subject being discussed. Pulls listener in.]

Introduction: This is Pr. Orleen Haseltine with and Sam Beamond along with Bruce Nelson (and our very own Otto Steve Lunde & Pr. Robin Bjornson joining us remotely).

Date/Topic: Wednesday, June 17th

We thank you for joining us for this week’s discussion on Chew On This. This week’s topic

When Jesus Speaks: Studying His Parables

Access/Website: All sermon/discussion, raw notes, and handouts are available at:
realchurch.org/wednesdaynight

Discussion

Closing Statement [Gives application of the topic. How do I apply to my life what was just talked about?]

Outro (Steve)

Thank you for joining us for this week’s discussion on **When Jesus Speaks: Studying His Parables**

To enjoy this process live, come join us and the Wednesday Night Crew every Wednesday night @ Maranatha’s Forest Lake Campus @ 6:30PM. This is Steve Lunde, ALWAYS BE KIND.



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Intro:

13:34–35

MYTH: JESUS CHRIST WAS ONLY A GREAT MORAL TEACHER

People marveled at the teaching of Jesus. Whether He spoke in interesting parables (Matt. 13:34) or gave more straightforward, extended discourses (chs. 5–7), people followed Him everywhere, hanging on His every word (7:28). “No man ever spoke like this Man!” His listeners remarked (John 7:46). And they were right. Jesus was a master teacher and communicator.

Moreover, beyond simply teaching the highest moral and spiritual principles ever known, Jesus actually lived them. He told people to love their enemies; He forgave those who crucified Him. He told people to lay down their lives for others; He laid down His own life for the world. He told people not to worry about material possessions; He owned no more than the clothes on His back. Jesus' example makes Him the most remarkable of all teachers.

And yet that legacy almost makes it too easy for people to dismiss Him, ignoring both His message and His person: “Jesus? Yes, He was a great moral teacher.” What they really mean is that, for them, Jesus was *only* a teacher—a great teacher, perhaps the greatest the world has ever seen, but a teacher and nothing more.

Neither He nor His followers would allow for that. Jesus was either very much more than a great teacher or else very much less than one. For in addition to His great moral precepts, He made astonishing claims that no other sane person has ever made, and behaved in ways that no other decent human has. For instance:

- He claimed to forgive people's sins (Matt. 9:2; Luke 7:47–48).
- He accepted people's worship (Matt. 8:2–3; 9:18–19; 14:33).
- He said that He alone was the way to God, the truth of God, and the life of God (John 5:40; 6:44; 7:16–17; 14:6).
- He said that He had come to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).
- He promised that He would rise from the dead (Matt. 20:19; 27:63).
- He claimed that humanity would ultimately be accountable to Him (Matt. 7:21–23; 25:31–46).
- He claimed to be God and allowed others to call Him God (16:15–16; 26:63–64; John 8:58).

These are astonishing claims. Any teacher who would make them had better be telling the truth or else He would be the worst of all liars and neither great nor moral.

The evidence suggests that Jesus was telling the truth. For in addition to His explicit claims are the implicit claims of fulfilled Old Testament prophecies and the performance of supernatural miracles. And there is also the fact that countless others who have examined His words and actions have come away convinced that He was not merely a great moral teacher, but the very Son of God. Among them have been determined and supposedly unshakable skeptics like Thomas and adamant opponents like the brilliant Saul of Tarsus who ended up becoming His most ardent follower.

To believe that Jesus was simply a great moral teacher is untenable. **As C. S. Lewis put it in his book *Mere Christianity*:**

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else He would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.¹

¹ [Word in life study Bible](#). (1996). (electronic ed.). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.



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Parables already studied:

Parable #1: Matthew 13:44

"The kingdom of heaven (A) is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy (B) he goes and sells all that he has and (C) buys that field. (ESV). WE are His Treasure

Parable #2: Matthew 20:1-15 Laborers in the Vineyard

Standard view: The Kingdom of God rewards on its own measuring system. **Alternative view:** The Kingdom of God redefines rewards: Care & Generosity. The Kingdom of God understands our needs. (All willing workers got paid a day's wage as they had the same life needs to support)

Parable #3: Luke 15:11-32 The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Standard view: The main character is the Prodigal. God rejoices over the Prodigals return home. Salvation for the lost.

Alternative view: Lost Sheep...Lost Coin...Lost Son

Is the main 'character' Heaven? The Kingdom of God.

Instructing us on what Heaven is like...what happens when the lost are found?

- Who was He responding to before He told these three parables?

Luke 15:1-3 *"Now (A) the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. (B) And the Pharisees and the scribes (C) grumbled, saying, (D) 'This man receives sinners and (E) eats with them.' (F) So he told them this parable:"*

- How does it affect our now with all that is going on in Society?

(There are no "Those People".)

"For Jesus, sin is desiring the death of God and wanting to take his gifts without reference to the giver." Bailey, K. E. (2003). [Jacob and the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story](#) (p. 137). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Parable #4: Luke 11:5-9 Parable of procuring Bread (Luke 11:1-4 Disciples asking how to pray, LORD's prayer)

Standard view: PRAY...Ask and Seek and you will Find – Persistence

Alternative Additional view: Not just what to pray but HOW to pray in FAITH

Our daily bread: What happens when we do not have any 'daily bread'? Is this parable about asking for the things we do not have? Missional prayer?

"it's for people who find themselves with absolutely nothing to offer when facing a person in desperate need."

Doug Newton

Parable #5: Matthew 18:23-35 The Unforgiving Servant

Standard view: You are forgiven so you must forgive.

Alternative Additional view: Don't get caught in rationalizing... 'I cannot do that forgiveness thing'

Parable #6: Matthew 7:24-27 The Parable of the House on the Rock

Standard view: Jesus is our foundation **James 1:22: "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only"**

Alternative view: This goes beyond *saving* grace; He offers *sanctifying* grace. Call to understand and walk in the process of Sanctification. DO THE HARD THINGS...yes, Jesus means that. **Luke 14:26**



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Parable #7: (preceded by 10 Virgins parable and followed by Final Judgment=Sheep/Goats)

Matthew 25:14-30 (ESV)

The Parable of the Talents

¹⁴ “For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants^[a] and entrusted to them his property. ¹⁵ To one he gave five talents,^[b] to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. ¹⁷ So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸ But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹ Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.’ ²¹ His master said to him, ‘**Well done, good and faithful servant.**’^[c] You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ ²² And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.’ ²³ His master said to him, ‘**Well done, good and faithful servant.** You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ ²⁴ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed,²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.’ ²⁶ But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed?’ ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. ²⁹ For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.³⁰ And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

What does this parable mean?

Standard view: We have Eternal Rewards (Handout on website) “Well done good and faithful servant.”

What does this mean for the servant who did not invest? The worthless servant?

- Isn't 'no rewards' enough?
- What was this servant thinking?
- Was this person really a servant? Was the Master really his master...did this servant really serve his master?
- Was “I don’t want you as MY Master” this servants thinking...”You suck, Master!”
- Is this like giving the Master the finger today?
- You shall know them by their fruits. **Matthew 7:15-20**

¹⁵ “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

Alternative Additional view: Rewards/Giftings **given NOW** as well, for us to invest

Matthew 16:25 “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”

Living without fear of not doing or being enough because: Success = Faithfulness not accumulation.

“Rather than the commendation-and-reward moment occurring at the end of a person’s life, it appears to be midstream—*prehumous*, if that is a word. This aligns with what Jesus had already said to His disciples about faithful servanthood when He led up to the parables told in Matthew 25: “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions” (24:45–47).” Doug Newton

What does it teach us about the Kingdom of God?

- We are entrusted with talents from the LORD.
- We are expected to use those talents.



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- Our life here on earth is rewarded.
- “Faithfulness means risk more than results” Doug Newton
- **25:31** The return of the Lord will usher in a judgment, which will divide people. The judgment will be based on moral character, and the character is revealed by charitable deeds or the lack of them. Outward evidence demonstrates inner righteousness or unrighteousness. Good works do not produce good character; good character produces good works.
Dr. Hayford

TEAM ASK:

“We don’t have to wait until we go to our “eternal rest” to experience a soul-resting commendation and reward from the Lord as His response to our faithful service.” Doug Newton

Agree/Disagree with the above statement? Do you have any examples?

How does this glimpse into what the Kingdom of God is like affect my thinking? My actions? My life?

- Eric Liddel (Chariots of Fire)

When speaking with his sister about the tension of Ministry and Running, he state he feels God’s pleasure when he runs (inferring that the same happens in ministry work). Then, he states, “To give it up, would be to hold Him in contempt.”

- The NACHO story (Baja Sol)

Precedes in Matthew 25

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

25 “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps^[a] and went to meet the bridegroom.^[b] ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. ¹¹ Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

(6). *The Parable of the Talents. 25:14–30*

14–23. The Parable of the Talents further emphasizes the need for personal preparation and faithful service to the Master (see also Lk 19:11–28). The **talents** represent monetary values and are distributed according to **ability** (vs. 15). **Far country** indicating the time between Jesus’ first coming and His final return during which He is in heaven. The three **servants** are typical of three types who are entrusted various tasks in accordance with their own ability. Not all are expected to produce the same results, but all are to be faithful with what they have had entrusted to them. Thus, the first two double their money, while the last one hides the **one ... in the earth**. The phrase **After a long time** gives a veiled indication of the length of Christ’s departure to heaven during the present age. Each of those producing results is commended by the Master: **Well done ... good and faithful servant** and is promised to be a **ruler over many things**, with a view to continued service in the millennial kingdom.

24–25. The great mistake of the unfaithful servant was in misjudging the character of his Master: **thou art a hard man**. He could not have known the Master well to assume him to be severe and merciless. Atkinson (p. 801) observes, “The slave seems to have thought that whatever he did his master would be unjust to him.” He failed to understand the real generosity of his Master who wanted him to experience the joys of service. Whereas the Parable of the Ten Virgins emphasized personal preparation for the coming of Christ, the Parable of the Talents stresses the importance of faithful service during His present absence.

26–30. The fact that the latter man is called **wicked and slothful** and an **unprofitable servant** (vs. 30) who is cast out into **outer darkness**, certainly indicates that he was not a true disciple of the Master. The idea of this illustrative parable is that all true believers will produce results (elsewhere, “fruits”) in varying degrees. Those who produce no results are not truly converted. Those who deny soul-winning, personal evangelism, and church growth will find no comfort in this story. Those who hide their treasure (probably, the life-changing message of the gospel), because of a harsh view of the Master’s sovereignty over them, reveal that they do not really love people and, therefore, their own salvation is questionable!²

² Hindson, E. E., & Kroll, W. M. (Eds.). (1994). [KJV Bible Commentary](#) (pp. 1950–1951). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.



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TRUE SUCCESS MEANS FAITHFULNESS

25:14–30 The story of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30) is about the kingdom of heaven (25:14), but it offers an important lesson about success. **God measures our success not by what we have, but by what we do with what we have**—for all that we have is a gift from Him. We are really only managers to whom He has entrusted resources and responsibilities.

The key thing He looks for is faithfulness (25:21, 23), doing what we can to obey and honor Him with whatever He has given us. We may or may not be “successful” as our culture measures success, in terms of wealth, prestige, power, or fame. In the long run that hardly matters. What counts is whether we have faithfully served God with what He has entrusted to us. By all means we must avoid wasting our lives, the way the third servant wasted his talents, by failing to carry out our Master’s business.³

25:14 Watchfulness does not mean idleness, but a faithful discharge of one’s responsibilities. The wise use of gifts and abilities entrusted to us results in greater opportunities, while their neglect results not only in the loss of more opportunities, but of that which was entrusted to us.

25:15 A talent was worth about \$1,000.

25:26 The reward of further responsibility (first two servants) is contrasted by judgment upon the inactive and lazy servant. In view of the day of reckoning, faithful discharge of one’s responsibilities is required.

WORD WEALTH

25:29 **have abundance**, *perisseuo* (per-is-syoo-oh); Strong’s #4052: To superabound, have in excess, greatly surpass, excel. The word shows the generosity of God’s grace, giving assurance that faithful use of one’s talents and gifts sets the stage for one’s own advancement.

25:30 This need not be concluded as referring to the loss of one’s justification, but may instead portray the forfeiting of one’s reward for committed service in the kingdom, a loss of joy, with **weeping and gnashing one’s teeth**, reflecting the remorse for lost opportunity.

~~**25:31** The return of the Lord will usher in a judgment, which will divide people. The judgment will be based on moral character, and the character is revealed by charitable deeds or the lack of them. Outward evidence demonstrates inner righteousness or unrighteousness. Good works do not produce good character; good character produces good works.⁴~~

Matthew 25:31–46

The Final Judgment

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, ⁴¹you did it to me.’

⁴¹“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴²For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Notes from Book:

7

An Overdone and Underdone “Well Done”

The Five Talents

Matthew 25:14–30

Wouldn’t it be nice if you could hear God say “Well done” before you die?

³ *Word in life study Bible*. (1996). (electronic ed., Mt 25:14). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

⁴ Hayford, J. W. (Ed.). (1997). *Spirit filled life study Bible* (electronic ed., Mt 25:31). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.



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I've been part of so many funerals during my pastoral ministry I think I should be excused from my own. Because I've participated in so many, I can easily tell you the top five most commonly heard expressions at funerals. Coming in at number 5: "Doesn't he (or she) look so peaceful?" For your information, this also happens to be number one on the list of the top five lies told at funerals.

Number 4: "If I never hear another bagpipe rendition of 'Amazing Grace,' it'll be too soon." Number 3: "She is singing with the angels today." And rounding out the top five is a two-way tie for first place:

- "Well done, good and faithful servant."
- "I never heard him (or her) say a cross word to anyone."

If you need me to break the tie between these two finalists, the award goes to the "Well done" statement—and not only because it comes directly from the Bible. The one about never hearing a cross word should be disqualified on the grounds that it simply isn't believable. Not that people are lying. In the grief of the moment, I have no doubt tears of sorrow fog the memory and the misty light of sentimentality shines only on the dearly departed one's finest moments.

However, if it were true the deceased person never said a cross word, and given the fact that I have heard it said of 99 percent of the people lying in repose, one must wonder why the world isn't a kinder place. That remaining 1 percent of crabby people (whose funerals I have never performed) must get around as miraculously as Santa on Christmas Eve, because the sound of cross words is as ubiquitous as blasting car horns in New York City during rush hour.

So "Well done, good and faithful servant" gets my vote as the number-one expression heard at funerals. Too bad it's a misunderstanding of the parable in which it is found.

I can sense your hackles rising, especially if you've said or heard this said about a departed loved one, so I should jump quickly to explain. The parable of the talents is found in a series of teachings and parables Jesus gave in response to the disciples requesting a timetable for the temple's destruction, which He had just predicted and which they assumed would signal the "end of the age" (Matt. 24:3). "Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. 'Do you see all these things?' he asked. 'Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.' As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. 'Tell us,' they said, 'when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?'" (vv. 1–3).

In response Jesus gave many prophecies about world events and the disciples' upcoming persecution. What He said was couched in such apocalyptic language that many Christian teachers over the centuries have viewed Matthew 24–25 as a description of the so-called end times. Although there are many differences of opinion about the end times, the central dramatic event involves the second coming of Jesus. So scholars typically interpret Jesus' parables in this extended teaching section against that backdrop. Whether or not that should be the case remains an open question.

Regardless of how the end times will play out and when they began or will begin, Jesus used three parables and one dramatic scene to emphasize the importance of being ready at all times to account for one's faithfulness to the Lord. This parable of the talents is centrally located in that context. That's why Jesus began with the word *again*.

Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.

The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. (Matt. 25:14–18)

Then Jesus brought His listeners to that sobering moment of accountability when each of the three servants presented to the returning master the results of his efforts to steward the master's property.

After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. "Master," he said, "you entrusted me with five bags of gold. 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 two bags of gold also came. "Master," he said, "you entrusted me with two bags of gold; 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!" (vv. 19–23)

Let's pause in the flow of the story here, because the third servant's report resulted in condemnation, not the "Well done" commendation. That will take us to another matter we'll consider in a moment. So before we dig into that, let's deal with what I consider a misunderstanding that leads to the "Well done" expression being overused at funeral services.

Pre- or Posthumous

Here's the issue: because this teaching section in Matthew 24–25 is fraught with end times language and images, regardless of how they are understood, it has become impossible, apparently, for people to imagine this moment of accountability, commendation, and reward from the master as anything but a final scene in heaven. In other words, we conceive of no other occasion when a person will hear these words from the Lord than after his or her life on earth is over. Hence, it is the number-one thing said at funerals. And yes, it is appropriate to say it then, but not exclusively then.



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This accountability moment that promises the hope of commendation and reward is *not* necessarily awarded posthumously—that is, after the soul leaves the body to meet the Lord. Why should we think that? According to the master's own words, the moment of commendation and reward occurred *before* the servants completed their service for the master. Note that the master clearly indicated more work on his behalf remained to be done: "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!'" (Matt. 25:21).

Rather than the commendation and reward moment occurring at the end of a person's life, it appears to be midstream—*prehumous*, if that is a word. This aligns with what Jesus had already said to His disciples about faithful servanthood when He led up to the parables told in Matthew 25: "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions" (24:45–47).

It also concurs with the other version of this parable recorded in Luke's gospel, in which some significant differences appear. Yet both imply that the commendation-and-reward moment occurred when there was still work to be done. Luke's version ends by saying, "'Well done, my good servant!' his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities'" (Luke 19:17).

While we all certainly hope to hear "Well done" at our deaths, it does not appear that the commendation-and-reward moment occurs only when our work on earth is done. Why is this important?

The Father's Reassurance

Think of how we imagine hearing these words of our Lord. That wonderful moment will bring relief and peace and will be a time when you can finally rest from your labors and enjoy the blissful experience of completion. Can it be we don't have to wait until we die to experience the sweet taste of that reward? What if we can enjoy that experience even in this life? Jesus seems to have confirmed that possibility when He promised "rest for your souls" to weary people if they work faithfully alongside Him in this life: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 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" (Matt. 11:28–29).

We don't have to wait until we go to our "eternal rest" to experience a soul-resting commendation and reward from the Lord as His response to our faithful service. And just think: that means we can enter into His happiness in this life over who we are (though we are still in process) and what we have done (though we wish we could have done better)!

As a pastor, I have sat across the table from far too many people who choke back tears while describing their troubled relationship with a mother or father. I've seen grown men hang their heads and slump their shoulders in utter defeat as they say, "My dad never said 'I love you' or told me he was proud of me." Even as adults they longed for some assurance that their fathers loved and prized them.

I understand how important that is. My dad rarely gushed emotional words of love. Although I was a sports star on my high school and college teams, he rarely attended my games. He couldn't. People back then didn't have as much freedom to break away from work to sit on the sidelines and watch their kids play sports. My parents didn't applaud every breath I took or plaster every latest creation of mine on the fridge as if I was Andrew Wyeth. In fact, my dad was a stickler for excellence and didn't applaud anything that was not worthy of acclaim just to make someone feel good. But I never felt I had to measure up to some standard in order to be acceptable to him. Why?

Fortunately, there were times—moments of commendation and reward—that fed my sense of worth and grounded me in the unshakable assurance of his love. Like the day he dropped me off for my freshman year at college. The car was unloaded. Packed boxes crowded my dorm room. My mind had already focused on the all-important question of where to hang posters of Jimi Hendrix and Pelé. So Dad and I said good-bye, and he left to travel the two hours back home. About fifteen minutes later, a knock sounded on the door. It was Dad.

"What are you doing back?"

He was a little awkward when he said, "I just had to come back, because I wanted to look you in the eye when I said I love you. I'm proud of you, boy." Then he left again.

That was one of the most important moments of my life. I know what it feels like to have a father not just rattle off a few words of love but say them and mean them so deeply he had to turn around and drive an extra thirty miles just to tell me. That kind of affirmation and commendation can't be shaken. You don't have to hear it very often, because the stabilizing soul-rest it creates in a son lasts and lasts. **According to this parable, we can experience that from our heavenly Father even before we die.**



Week 3 – When Jesus Speaks: Studying His Parables

[Fresh eyes on Jesus' parables: discovering new insights in familiar passages.](#) Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook.

Risk and Reward

If this “Well done, good and faithful servant” experience is truly a possibility in this life, then we should be careful to understand who Jesus considers a faithful servant. Unfortunately, teachers often use this parable as a “perfect” lesson on stewardship. The moral of the story, we are told, is to use wisely and productively the resources the Lord has placed in our hands. Of course, that should be our desire, but that is not the story’s moral. The key message is the part of the parable that is underdone.

Is the point really to be productive? No, the point is to try something, anything that will benefit the master to some degree. The first and second servants were not equally productive, yet they received the same commendation and reward. The master was angry with the third servant for letting fear render him fruitless. He was unwilling to take any risk with what he had been given. **It turns out this parable is not so much about stewardship and productivity as it is about taking risks for the master’s benefit.** That is what pleases the Lord.

Remember, we are talking about the One who risked His reputation to associate with sinners (Matt. 9:10–11). The One who faced the charge of lawbreaker for healing on the Sabbath (12:9–13). The One who faced charges of blasphemy, because He not only healed a paraplegic man but also provided relief from the paralysis of sin (9:1–7). Obviously, He is not going to be pleased with someone who fears what he might lose if he tries to do something worthwhile for God. After all, He is the one who specifically denounced self-protection and promoted self-sacrifice: **“For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it” (16:25).**

This parable’s point is not that commendable stewardship equals success and productivity. No, the point is to honor the master’s resources enough to make the master’s business goals your priority; try something—anything—to be productive for him. My guess is that if any of the servants had come back and said, “I did my best to make something out of the money you gave me, but things did not work out as I hoped,” the master would *not* have gotten angry at him. In other words, **faithfulness means risk more than results.**

In a world that places so much emphasis on success and productivity, average Christians like us can easily get the idea that good results equal success and poor results equal failure. That’s why we hear only the success stories. However, here’s the good news: in God’s kingdom, faithfully risking all you’ve been given for His purposes and glory, regardless of the results, pleases the Lord and gives you the experience of “Well done” well before your casket closes.

20/20 Focus

1. Even though the point of this chapter is that we don’t have to wait until our deaths to enjoy a sense of “Well done,” it’s still nice to think of that happening when we meet the Lord. Name a couple people you know who should get a resounding “Well done” at the end of their lives. Why? (How about writing them a note?)
2. What might Jesus have had in mind when He had the master say to the faithful servants, “I will put you in charge of many things”?
3. Think of something you have been doing recently that leaves you wondering whether the Lord is pleased with your efforts: *Am I doing this well enough? Am I accomplishing anything worthwhile?* (If you’re sharing in a group right now, be vulnerable. It will help.)
4. Think of a time when you tried hard to do something good and right but failed. Based on the perspective presented in this chapter, can you hear what the Lord might be saying to you?
Lord Jesus, I know You don’t require success in order to gain Your approval, but I often struggle with those kinds of thoughts. They bind me up and make me afraid. I second-guess myself all the time. Please give me a fresh revelation of Your grace toward me even when—especially when—I fail. Help me find relief in knowing that You are pleased with me as long as I am attempting to use Your resources in my life for Your glory and purposes. Amen.

Vision Check

Life is full of clichés. The trick is spotting them before they lead you into lazy agreement. They are not always wrong, but they should always be questioned. Here’s a famous Bible saying that is an ideal candidate for examination: “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18 NKJV). Read the preceding context (chs. 3–4) to identify the specific problem John was addressing and see if we should adjust the way we use that cliché. You’ll find my thoughts to compare with yours on dougnewton.com or the Fresh Eyes app.

Newton, D. (2018). [Fresh eyes on Jesus' parables: discovering new insights in familiar passages.](#) Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook.



Parable #8:

Luke 16:1-9 (ESV)

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager

16 He also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. ² And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.’ ³ And the manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.’ ⁵ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶ He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ ⁷ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ ⁸ The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. ⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

What does this parable mean?

Standard view:

Hmmmm...cunning is good? Ha!

[⁸“The rich man had to admire the dishonest rascal for being so shrewd. And it is true that the children of this world are more shrewd in dealing with the world around them than are the children of the light. ⁹ Here’s the lesson: Use your worldly resources to benefit others and make friends. Then, when your possessions are gone, they will welcome you to an eternal home.] NLT

Use your worldly resources for eternal means?

Alternative view:

Robin Hood

BY THE FOURTH CENTURY THE PARABLES of the unjust steward and the prodigal son were separated by a chapter division. If the monks who established those divisions had kept the two parables in the same chapter, the entire history of the interpretation of Luke 16:1–8 would be different. The two parables have a significant number of parallels. Among these are:

1. Each has a noble master who demonstrates extraordinary grace to a wayward underling.
2. Both stories contain an ignoble son/steward who wastes the master’s resources.
3. In each the wayward underling reaches a moment of truth regarding those losses.
4. In both cases the son/steward throws himself on the mercy of the noble master.
5. Both parables deal with broken trust and the problems resulting from it.

These parallels suggest that the parable of the unjust steward needs to be examined in the light of what precedes it. **I am convinced that this parable continues to discuss theological themes that appear in the parable of the prodigal son. The subject is God, sin, grace and salvation—not honesty in dealing with money.**

A rich man had a steward and charges were made against the steward for wasting the rich man’s goods. Who brought these charges? We are not told, but the natural assumption is that the master’s friends in the community told him not to trust his steward. If the reports were from other servants, the master would investigate further. **Clearly, the reports are from sources that the master instinctively considers reliable.**

From the existence of these reports, the listener learns that the master is respected in the community. There is no hint of any criticism of his character. If he were a rascal, the community would not bother to report the steward’s wrongful activities.



Week 3 – When Jesus Speaks: Studying His Parables

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The first line of the parable reveals three kinds of people: the steward, his master and the community. To grasp the parable's thrust, the character of each needs to be understood.

After being informed of the steward's dishonesty, the owner summons the steward and asks, "What is this I hear about you?" This question is a classic opener for such a confrontation. As Ibn al-Tayyib notes, the master is not seeking information. The steward does not know what information has reached the master, and if the former panics on hearing this question he will no doubt give the master a great deal of new information. But this particular steward is too clever. Indeed, he has probably used this same technique with other servants. He knows the game and refuses to play. He responds to a direct order with complete silence.

After a few tense moments, the master realizes that although he cannot extract any new information from the steward, he already has enough reliable information to fire him. Accordingly, the master continues with, "Turn in the account of your stewardship for you can no longer be steward." The Greek word translated "account" has a definite article attached to it which means "the account books." The steward is not asked to "balance the books" but to "turn them in." In short, he is fired on the spot.

In the story the master fires the agent in person, and from that point onward everything the steward does is illegal and thereby not binding on the master. The steward must relinquish the account books because he no longer has any authority for the workings of the estate. Yet the account books represent power and they are still in his hands. From this point on in the story the steward is an ex-manager who has the books but has been fired. These two facts are critical to the rest of the parable.

What did Jesus' listeners expect the steward to do? In a traditional setting in the Middle East, any person in authority over others does not expect to dismiss an ordinary servant, let alone a manager, without days of negotiation. As a first response the steward could say, "Beloved Master, I have served you. My father served your father. My grandfather served your grandfather. Surely you are not going to trash this beautiful three-generational relationship over a little misunderstanding over money!" Or he may offer, "This really isn't my fault. I have done my best, but I do not have a thousand eyes. I cannot watch everything. The people I work with are thieves." A third alternative might be, "Bring in these liars who tell you I am stealing. Let me confront them, and we will see if the cowards have the courage to repeat these lies in front of me!"

These and other well-known ploys are available to the steward, but he employs none of them. The last of his options is to send his influential friends in the community to visit the master and plead his case. The steward does not try any of these ploys because he knows that with this master such maneuvers will achieve nothing. East and West, silence is consent and in this story silence is a confession of guilt. It is also a confession regarding the nature of the master, who cannot be manipulated or pressured. Observing this indirect confession and unexpected retreat is fundamental to a more accurate understanding of the story.

The steward's silent acceptance of dismissal is stunning. For decades I have both observed and questioned Middle Easterners in positions of authority and have never seen or heard of a case of an underling, when dismissed, walking out of the room without pleading to be reinstated. Such behavior is unimaginable. Its theological significance must not be overlooked. From Adam onward, sinners, when confronted by God, never successfully offer excuses for the evil they have done, but like Adam they often try.

The next scene is a monologue by the steward who has been fired, although no one knows his status save the master. On his way to collect the account books, the steward says to himself, "What shall I do, because my master is taking the stewardship away from me?" He ruminates, "I am not strong enough to dig." That means that he cannot work as a laborer in the fields. Farming involves digging, which is necessary in preparing the soil for a new crop. Narrow terraces and sharp corners cannot be plowed, they must be dug. To his credit he considers such a menial task while admitting his physical limitations. He continues, "I am ashamed to beg." Not every one is. In addition to his sense of personal honor, he knows that he lacks the qualifications for begging that the community accepts (blindness, a broken back, loss of a limb, etc.). In short, he has a few redeeming qualities, which include a realistic appraisal of himself and some residual personal honor.

In the middle of reflecting on his "outcast state" the light suddenly dawns as a new idea comes to mind. His soliloquy continues:

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| 4. I know what I will do,
so that when I am put out of the stewardship
they may receive me into their own houses. | A SOLUTION
Identified |
|---|--------------------------|

His declared goal is to be received into someone else's house. This phrase is an idiom that appears in the work of Epictetus, a first-century Greek Stoic philosopher, and means "to get another job." He wants to manage somebody's estate, but how can he achieve such a goal?

The steward knows that anything he does with regard to the affairs of the estate is formally illegal, but the rest of the staff is not yet aware that he has been fired. He was dismissed in private and the books are still in his possession—but that will change quickly because he has been ordered to turn them in. He discovers that he has one last ace that he can play and with daring proceeds to play it. If he is simply fired for corruption, no one will hire him. In effect he says, "I am not the only thief in town. I



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know what I must do in order to be able to land on my feet when this unpleasant matter is finalized, and everybody finds out that I am fired. I must arrange an occasion that will demonstrate my shrewdness and at the same time make me popular.”

Ibn al-Tayyib notes that sin begets sin. After the servant is caught stealing, he should repent and reform his life. Instead he decides to steal more. Following his preconceived plan, he does not go to his master's debtors. He summons them to come to him and is careful to talk to them individually. Naturally the steward orders the servants to inform the debtors that he, the steward wants to see them. The servants obey the steward's commands because they think he is still in authority over them. The debtors receive their summons and respond by going to the steward's office. They would not dream of appearing if they knew that he had been fired from his post. The very fact that the servants are still taking orders from him confirms (for the debtors) that the steward is still in command.

It is not harvest time. The summons can only mean that the master has some important information he wants the steward to communicate to them. Delegating the making of important financial decisions to underlings is not an assumed part of Middle Eastern culture. The debtors are confident that the steward has a message for them from the master.

These are precisely the assumptions that the steward wants the wealthy debtors to bring with them. On the debtors' arrival, the steward conducts private interviews, not a group meeting. Private interviews can be tailored to fit the various individuals, while a group meeting might spin out of control. In a group meeting the debtors could react to each other, and the steward's influence would wane. He wants to maintain control. Furthermore, as Ibn al-Tayyib suggests, he wants them to record the gifts that (they think) he has arranged for them. Ibn al-Tayyib writes:

“Take your bill, sit down quickly and write fifty.” This means, “Sit down before my master takes the bills from me, and write fifty instead of one hundred. And as for the extra fifty, they will be divided between the two of us after this is all over.” Note that this steward should have safeguarded the rights of his master, but rather he does that which causes half of the debt to be lost in order to win the debtor as a partner with him in embezzlement so that in the future the debtor cannot lodge a complaint against him with the master.

The steward's plan is astute, and Ibn al-Tayyib's reflections are brilliant. **In honor-shame cultures, such as in the Middle East, a clear distinction is made between “public propriety” and “private awareness.”** Public propriety preserves personal honor. As regards “public propriety” the debtor's public stance is, “I had no idea that the steward was fired!” Publicly he can claim, “I thought the reductions were authorized by the master.” Without the possibility of “public propriety” the debtors will not cooperate. They want to continue to rent land from the master. Privately, the debtor can accept a little deal that will enrich both the steward and himself. Ibn Al-Tayyib understands perfectly how such things work. He notes astutely that by cooperating in such a scam the debtor is surrendering the possibility of going to the master and telling him what has happened. Each conversation is private, and without witnesses, who can prove what was said? The steward knows exactly what he is doing.

The reason for haste is obvious. These little deals will not be possible once the steward surrenders the books to the master. Having been ordered to turn them in, he dare not delay more than an hour or two.

When the steward asks the first debtor, “How much do you owe my master?” he is not asking for information. A Middle Eastern estate manager has the accounts in his possession. The question is the opening move in the discussion between the steward and the debtor to insure that they agree on the amount of indebtedness. If the farmer quotes the same figure that is written on the steward's documents, they can proceed. If not, the figure will need to be debated. In a world where documentary evidence is limited, few people can read and oral tradition is honored, such niceties must be observed.

The debts and the reductions are enormous. Fifty measures of oil was worth about five hundred denarii, which was the wage for a farm worker for a year and a half. The second renter receives roughly the same reduction even though the percentage is different. It is in the steward's interest to have the debtors do the writing. He wants the changes in their handwriting recorded so that anyone looking at the accounts will recognize the handwriting and know that the renters have been contacted and have accepted in writing.

Each debtor makes the suggested changes in his rental agreement and returns to the village to share the “public” good news with family and friends. As word spreads in the village a festive mood breaks out in celebration of the most generous man who ever rented land in the history of the village and in praise of his steward who convinced the master to make huge reductions in their rents.

When the interviews are finished, the steward gathers the recently altered accounts and with a cat-that-ate-the-canary smile surrenders them to the master. The master takes the accounts, notes the changes recorded in the handwritings of his closest business associates and quickly considers his options. He is faced with two choices.

First, legally he can go to the village and explain that the reductions were not authorized, the steward had been fired at the time he made them, indeed he had no legal right to do anything, and the original amounts must be paid in full. But such an action would turn the party in progress that was praising his generosity, into a gripe session attacking him as unreasonable and unfair. Or, second, the master can remain quiet, pay the price of this clever rascal's salvation and continue to enjoy his reputation as a generous man, which is enhanced by this ruse but not created by it. He *is* a generous man because he dismissed the steward but did not jail him. Furthermore, he could have sold the steward and his family as slaves to recoup his losses, yet he did not. His generous nature led him to refrain from both actions.



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In the light of the extraordinary grace that he had just received, the steward decides to risk everything on one role of the dice. He builds his ruse on the basis of his unshakable awareness of the generous nature of his master. He “sins that grace might abound.” As we will see, he is *condemned* for his action and *praised* for his confidence in his master’s gracious nature.

The steward succeeds. The community will discover the details and will be amazed at his intelligence and daring. They will not trust him but will nonetheless employ him on the basis that such a clever fellow “must work for *us* and not *them*.” Abraham Lincoln wanted those in opposition to him to work for him, not for his opponents. He also wanted to keep them in sight and under close scrutiny. He knew that they had ability. In our parable, the community will employ the steward for the same reasons. (After all—he did make them a lot of money—but don’t breath a word!)

The master pays the price of the steward’s salvation and commends him for his mental agility.

7. Then the master commended the dishonest steward for his prudence. MASTER STEWARD

For the sons of this age are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light.

The steward and the master become the heroes of the community. Having procured a huge economic windfall for the village, the community will find a place where the steward can be employed—and watched!

The master congratulates the steward for his cleverness and for the backhanded compliment he gives his master. The entire scheme is built on the steward’s complimentary evaluation of the nature of the master. T. W. Manson summarizes the master’s attitude: “There is all the difference in the world between ‘I applaud the dishonest steward because he acted cleverly’ and ‘I applaud the clever steward because he acted dishonestly.’ ” Manson continues, “we must take the purport of the [final] speech to be; ‘This is a fraud; but it is a most ingenious fraud. The steward is a rascal; but he is a wonderfully clever rascal.’ ”

The parable is a “Tom and Jerry” story. The little mouse matches wits with the big cat and wins. The parable is built on the psychology of an oppressed peasantry, such as is known to have existed in Galilee at the time of Jesus. **The steward is a Robin Hood figure, a countercultural hero.** But at the end of the story, Jesus calls him “a son of this age/world.” He is smart enough to know that his only hope is to put his entire trust in the unqualified mercy of his generous master. His morals are deplorable. **Nonetheless, Jesus wants “the sons of light” to use their intelligence, like the dishonest steward, and to trust completely in the mercy of God for their salvation. The prodigal son made a similar decision.**

(Summary notes on page 18)

What does it teach us about the Kingdom of God?

- Salvation is an act of Mercy
- The Character of God will outline His actions

How does this glimpse into what the Kingdom of God is like affect my thinking? My actions? My life?

Luke 16:10-17

¹⁰“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own? ¹³No servant can serve two masters, for 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 God and money.”

The Law and the Kingdom of God

¹⁴The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. ¹⁵And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

¹⁶“The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it.^[a] ¹⁷But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.



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The Parable of the Unjust Steward

LUKE 16:1-8

By the fourth century the parables of the unjust steward and the prodigal son were separated by a chapter division. If the monks who established those divisions had kept the two parables in the same chapter, the entire history of the interpretation of Luke 16:1-8 would be different. The two parables have a significant number of parallels. Among these are:

1. Each has a noble master who demonstrates extraordinary grace to a wayward underling.
2. Both stories contain an ignoble son/steward who wastes the master's resources.
3. In each the wayward underling reaches a moment of truth regarding those losses.
4. In both cases the son/steward throws himself on the mercy of the noble master.
5. Both parables deal with broken trust and the problems resulting from it.

These parallels suggest that the parable of the unjust steward needs to be examined in the light of what precedes it. **I am convinced that this parable continues to discuss theological themes that appear in the parable of the prodigal son. The subject is God, sin, grace and salvation — not honesty in dealing with money.**

T. W. Manson feels that the parable of the unjust steward “may almost be regarded as an appendix to the parable of the Prodigal Son.”²

A DISTURBING STORY

The parable of the unjust steward has always been disturbing. Preachers, writers, interpreters and teachers of the Bible often avoid it like the plague. Superficially, the parable appears to present a story of a steward who cheats his master and is commended by Jesus for being a liar and a thief. In the fourth century, Julian the apostate used this parable as a primary text claiming that the parable taught Jesus' followers to be liars and thieves, and that noble Romans should reject all such corrupting influences. The parable's text is displayed in figure 26.1.

- | | | |
|----|---|--------------------------|
| 1. | There was a rich man who had a steward,
and charges were brought to him
that he was wasting his goods. | MASTER
STEWARD |
| 2. | And he called him and said to him,
“What is this I hear about you?
Turn in the account of your stewardship,
for you can no longer be steward.” | LOSES |
| 3. | And the steward said to himself,
“What shall I do, because my master
is taking the stewardship away from me?
I am not strong enough to dig.
I am ashamed to beg. | LOSES |
| 4. | I know what I will do,
so that when I am put out of the
stewardship
they may receive me into their own houses. | A SOLUTION
Identified |
| 5. | So, summoning his master's debtors one by one,
he said to the first, “How much do you owe my master?”

And he said, “A hundred measures of oil.”
And he said to him, “Take your bill,
and sit down quickly and write fifty.” | GAINS |
| 6. | Then he said to another, “And how much do you
owe?”
And he said, “A hundred measures of wheat.”
And he said to him, “Take your bill and write
eighty.” | GAINS |
| 7. | Then the master commended the dishonest steward | MASTER |



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for his prudence.

STEWARD

For the sons of this age are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light.

Figure 26.1. The parable of the unjust steward (Lk 16:1–8)

THE RHETORIC

The outline of the parable is a *modified prophetic rhetorical template*. The classic seven stanzas appear but the inversion of the scenes does not follow the common 1–2–3–4–3–2–1 format. Instead, the second and third stanzas are on the same subject as is the case with stanzas 5 and 6. The climax in the middle occurs where the steward finally figures out how to proceed with his crisis. As in any well-told story, the listeners are not given the game plan, it simply unfolds before them. The parable uses two scenes to describe the problem (2–3) and two matching scenes (5–6) provide the solution. In the last scene the steward is praised (by the master in the parable) after he has cheated his master once again, and the listener/reader must discover the reason for the commendation. The verses that follow in Luke 16:9–13 display their own inner integrity and are best understood as a new paragraph.

COMMENTARY

This parable is deeply embedded in Middle Eastern traditional culture, and it is to that culture that interpreters must turn. How would Jesus' listeners have heard this parable? And how would they have responded to it? The first scene says,

1. There was a rich man who had a steward, MASTER
and charges were brought to him STEWARD
that he was wasting his goods.

~~A rich man had a steward and charges were made against the steward for wasting the rich man's goods. Who brought these charges? We are not told, but the natural assumption is that the master's friends in the community told him not to trust his steward. If the reports were from other servants, the master would investigate further. **Clearly, the reports are from sources that the master instinctively considers reliable.**~~

~~**From the existence of these reports, the listener learns that the master is respected in the community.** There is no hint of any criticism of his character. If he were a rascal, the community would not bother to report the steward's wrongful activities. The first line of the parable reveals three kinds of people: the steward, his master and the community. To grasp the parable's thrust, the character of each needs to be understood.~~

In this parable the community is just off stage but is still an important part of what happens on stage. In the parables of Jesus, when there are two major characters and one is ignoble, the other is always noble. Both are never evil. In this case, the steward is a liar and thief, but there is no hint that the master is dishonest. The two of them are not partners in crime.

In addition, any interpreter must decide whether the story is about bankers or farmers. The language presupposes a farming scene. It focuses on rents to be paid by tenants in the form of agricultural produce. The Greek word *oikonomos* (steward) can mean a manager of a farm or a banker's agent. Middle Eastern Arabic, Syriac and Coptic versions, however, have consistently translated this key word as "estate manager" not "banker." The story proceeds:

2. And he called him and said to him,
"What is this I hear about you? LOSES
Turn in the account of your stewardship,
for you can no longer be steward."

~~After being informed of the steward's dishonesty, the owner summons the steward and asks, "What is this I hear about you?" This question is a classic opener for such a confrontation. As Ibn al-Tayyib notes, the master is not seeking information. The steward does not know what information has reached the master, and if the former panics on hearing this question he will no doubt give the master a great deal of new information. But this particular steward is too clever. Indeed, he has probably used this same technique with other servants. He knows the game and refuses to play. He responds to a direct order with complete silence.~~

~~After a few tense moments, the master realizes that although he cannot extract any new information from the steward, he already has enough reliable information to fire him. Accordingly, the master continues with, "Turn in the account of your stewardship for you can no longer be steward." The Greek word translated "account" has a definite article attached to it which means "the account books." The steward is not asked to "balance the books" but to "turn them in." In short, he is fired on the spot.~~

Drawing on rabbinic sources, George Horowitz summarizes the laws governing a master and his agent and writes:

The appointment and powers of the agent may be revoked at any time with or without good cause, and whatever the agent does after revocation is not binding on the principle. It takes effect, however, only from the time that it is brought home to the agent or the person with whom he is dealing.



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In the story the master fires the agent in person, and from that point onward everything the steward does is illegal and thereby not binding on the master. The steward must relinquish the account books because he no longer has any authority for the workings of the estate. Yet the account books represent power and they are still in his hands. From this point on in the story the steward is an ex manager who has the books but has been fired. These two facts are critical to the rest of the parable.

What did Jesus’ listeners expect the steward to do? In a traditional setting in the Middle East, any person in authority over others does not expect to dismiss an ordinary servant, let alone a manager, without days of negotiation. As a first response the steward could say, “Beloved Master, I have served you. My father served your father. My grandfather served your grandfather. Surely you are not going to trash this beautiful three-generational relationship over a little misunderstanding over money!” Or he may offer, “This really isn’t my fault. I have done my best, but I do not have a thousand eyes. I cannot watch everything. The people I work with are thieves.” A third alternative might be, “Bring in these liars who tell you I am stealing. Let me confront them, and we will see if the cowards have the courage to repeat these lies in front of me!”

These and other well-known ploys are available to the steward, but he employs none of them. The last of his options is to send his influential friends in the community to visit the master and plead his case. The steward does not try any of these ploys because he knows that with this master such maneuvers will achieve nothing. East and West, silence is consent and in this story silence is a confession of guilt. It is also a confession regarding the nature of the master, who cannot be manipulated or pressured. Observing this indirect confession and unexpected retreat is fundamental to a more accurate understanding of the story.

The steward’s silent acceptance of dismissal is stunning. For decades I have both observed and questioned Middle Easterners in positions of authority and have never seen or heard of a case of an underling, when dismissed, walking out of the room without pleading to be reinstated. Such behavior is unimaginable. Its theological significance must not be overlooked. From Adam onward, sinners, when confronted by God, never successfully offer excuses for the evil they have done, but like Adam they often try.

THE STEWARD RESPONDS

- 3. And the steward said to himself,
 “What shall I do, because my master
 is taking the stewardship away from me? LOSES

I am not strong enough to dig.
I am ashamed to beg.

The next scene is a monologue by the steward who has been fired, although no one knows his status save the master. On his way to collect the account books, the steward says to himself, “What shall I do, because my master is taking the stewardship away from me?” He ruminates, “I am not strong enough to dig.” That means that he cannot work as a laborer in the fields. Farming involves digging, which is necessary in preparing the soil for a new crop. Narrow terraces and sharp corners cannot be plowed, they must be dug. To his credit he considers such a menial task while admitting his physical limitations. He continues, “I am ashamed to beg.” Not every one is. In addition to his sense of personal honor, he knows that he lacks the qualifications for begging that the community accepts (blindness, a broken back, loss of a limb, etc.). In short, he has a few redeeming qualities, which include a realistic appraisal of himself and some residual personal honor.

In the middle of reflecting on his “outcast state” the light suddenly dawns as a new idea comes to mind. His soliloquy continues:

- 4. — I know what I will do,
 so that when I am put out of the stewardship
 they may receive me into their own houses. A SOLUTION
Identified

His declared goal is to be received into someone else’s house. This phrase is an idiom that appears in the work of Epictetus, a first-century Greek Stoic philosopher, and means “to get another job.” He wants to manage somebody’s estate, but how can he achieve such a goal?

The steward knows that anything he does with regard to the affairs of the estate is formally illegal, but the rest of the staff is not yet aware that he has been fired. He was dismissed in private and the books are still in his possession—but that will change quickly because he has been ordered to turn them in. He discovers that he has one last ace that he can play and with daring proceeds to play it. If he is simply fired for corruption, no one will hire him. In effect he says, “I am not the only thief in town. I know what I must do in order to be able to land on my feet when this unpleasant matter is finalized, and everybody finds out that I am fired. I must arrange an occasion that will demonstrate my shrewdness and at the same time make me popular.”

Being a clever rascal he dreams up a cunning scheme. His plan unfolds in scenes 5 and 6:

- 5. So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one,
 he said to the first, “How much do you owe my
 master?” GAINS
 And he said, “A hundred measures of oil.”
 And he said to him, “Take your bill,
 and sit down quickly and write fifty.”



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6. Then he said to another, "And how much do you owe?"
And he said, "A hundred measures of wheat."
And he said to him, "Take your bill and write eighty."

GAINS

Ibn al-Tayyib notes that sin begets sin. After the servant is caught stealing, he should repent and reform his life. Instead he decides to steal more. Following his preconceived plan, he does not go to his master's debtors. He summons them to come to him and is careful to talk to them individually. Naturally the steward orders the servants to inform the debtors that he, the steward wants to see them. The servants obey the steward's commands because they think he is still in authority over them. The debtors receive their summons and respond by going to the steward's office. They would not dream of appearing if they knew that he had been fired from his post. The very fact that the servants are still taking orders from him confirms (for the debtors) that the steward is still in command.

It is not harvest time. The summons can only mean that the master has some important information he wants the steward to communicate to them. Delegating the making of important financial decisions to underlings is not an assumed part of Middle Eastern culture. The debtors are confident that the steward has a message for them from the master.

These are precisely the assumptions that the steward wants the wealthy debtors to bring with them. On the debtors' arrival, the steward conducts private interviews, not a group meeting. Private interviews can be tailored to fit the various individuals, while a group meeting might spin out of control. In a group meeting the debtors could react to each other, and the steward's influence would wane. He wants to maintain control. Furthermore, as Ibn al-Tayyib suggests, he wants them to record the gifts that (they think) he has arranged for them. Ibn al-Tayyib writes:

"Take your bill, sit down quickly and write fifty." This means, "Sit down before my master takes the bills from me, and write fifty instead of one hundred. And as for the extra fifty, they will be divided between the two of us after this is all over." Note that this steward should have safeguarded the rights of his master, but rather he does that which causes half of the debt to be lost in order to win the debtor as a partner with him in embezzlement so that in the future the debtor cannot lodge a complaint against him with the master.

The steward's plan is astute, and Ibn al-Tayyib's reflections are brilliant. **In honor-shame cultures, such as in the Middle East, a clear distinction is made between "public propriety" and "private awareness."** Public propriety preserves personal honor. As regards "public propriety" the debtor's public stance is, "I had no idea that the steward was fired!" Publicly he can claim, "I thought the reductions were authorized by the master." Without the possibility of "public propriety" the debtors will not cooperate. They want to continue to rent land from the master. Privately, the debtor can accept a little deal that will enrich both the steward and himself. Ibn Al-Tayyib understands perfectly how such things work. He notes astutely that by cooperating in such a scam the debtor is surrendering the possibility of going to the master and telling him what has happened. Each conversation is private, and without witnesses, who can prove what was said? The steward knows exactly what he is doing.

The reason for haste is obvious. These little deals will not be possible once the steward surrenders the books to the master. Having been ordered to turn them in, he dare not delay more than an hour or two.

When the steward asks the first debtor, "How much do you owe my master?" he is not asking for information. A Middle Eastern estate manager has the accounts in his possession. The question is the opening move in the discussion between the steward and the debtor to insure that they agree on the amount of indebtedness. If the farmer quotes the same figure that is written on the steward's documents, they can proceed. If not, the figure will need to be debated. In a world where documentary evidence is limited, few people can read and oral tradition is honored, such niceties must be observed.

The debts and the reductions are enormous. Fifty measures of oil was worth about five hundred denarii, which was the wage for a farm worker for a year and a half. The second renter receives roughly the same reduction even though the percentage is different. It is in the steward's interest to have the debtors do the writing. He wants the changes in their handwriting recorded so that anyone looking at the accounts will recognize the handwriting and know that the renters have been contacted and have accepted in writing.

Each debtor makes the suggested changes in his rental agreement and returns to the village to share the "public" good news with family and friends. As word spreads in the village a festive mood breaks out in celebration of the most generous man who ever rented land in the history of the village and in praise of his steward who convinced the master to make huge reductions in their rents.

When the interviews are finished, the steward gathers the recently altered accounts and with a cat that ate the canary smile surrenders them to the master. The master takes the accounts, notes the changes recorded in the handwritings of his closest business associates and quickly considers his options. He is faced with two choices.

First, legally he can go to the village and explain that the reductions were not authorized, the steward had been fired at the time he made them, indeed he had no legal right to do anything, and the original amounts must be paid in full. But such an action would turn the party in progress that was praising his generosity, into a gripe session attacking him as unreasonable and unfair. Or, second, the master can remain quiet, pay the price of this clever rascal's salvation and continue to enjoy his reputation as a generous man, which is enhanced by this ruse but not created by it. He *is* a generous man because he dismissed the steward but



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did not jail him. Furthermore, he could have sold the steward and his family as slaves to recoup his losses, yet he did not. His generous nature led him to refrain from both actions.

In the light of the extraordinary grace that he had just received, the steward decides to risk everything on one roll of the dice. He builds his ruse on the basis of his unshakable awareness of the generous nature of his master. He “sins that grace might abound.” As we will see, he is *condemned* for his action and *praised* for his confidence in his master’s gracious nature.

The steward succeeds. The community will discover the details and will be amazed at his intelligence and daring. They will not trust him but will nonetheless employ him on the basis that such a clever fellow “must work for *us* and not *them*.” Abraham Lincoln wanted those in opposition to him to work for him, not for his opponents. He also wanted to keep them in sight and under close scrutiny. He knew that they had ability. In our parable, the community will employ the steward for the same reasons. (After all – he did make them a lot of money – but don’t breath a word!)

The master pays the price of the steward’s salvation and commends him for his mental agility.

7. Then the master commended the dishonest steward for his prudence. MASTER STEWARD

For the sons of this age are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light.

The steward and the master become the heroes of the community. Having procured a huge economic windfall for the village, the community will find a place where the steward can be employed – and watched!

The master congratulates the steward for his cleverness and for the backhanded compliment he gives his master. The entire scheme is built on the steward’s complimentary evaluation of the nature of the master. T. W. Manson summarizes the master’s attitude: “There is all the difference in the world between ‘I applaud the dishonest steward because he acted cleverly’ and ‘I applaud the clever steward because he acted dishonestly.’” Manson continues, “we must take the purport of the [final] speech to be; ‘This is a fraud; but it is a most ingenious fraud. The steward is a rascal; but he is a wonderfully clever rascal.’”

The parable is a “Tom and Jerry” story. The little mouse matches wits with the big cat and wins. The parable is built on the psychology of an oppressed peasantry, such as is known to have existed in Galilee at the time of Jesus. **The steward is a Robin Hood figure, a countercultural hero.** But at the end of the story, Jesus calls him “a son of this age/world.” He is smart enough to know that his only hope is to put his entire trust in the unqualified mercy of his generous master. His morals are deplorable. **Nonetheless, Jesus wants “the sons of light” to use their intelligence, like the dishonest steward, and to trust completely in the mercy of God for their salvation. The prodigal son made a similar decision.**

SUMMARY: THE PARABLE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD

1. **The nature of God.** God is a God of justice, mercy and great personal integrity (honor). His sense of justice leads him to dismiss the rascal. His mercy is demonstrated in the decision to dismiss the servant rather than sell or imprison him for his thefts. It also shows in agreeing to pay the price for the servant’s salvation. His integrity appears vis-à-vis the community’s high regard for him and in his final dealing with the steward.
2. **The exposure of sin and its condemnation.** The coming of the kingdom brings a crisis. The steward’s sins are exposed. Because of the master’s nature, excuses for failures will not avail and the steward offers none. He is condemned as a “son of the world/age” because of his lies and his deceptions.
3. **The insidious nature of sin.** Once caught, the steward should have repented, reformed his life and tried to make amends. He did not do so, choosing instead to steal from his master, but in a bolder and more aggressive fashion. Sin breeds more and greater sin.
4. **The steward’s intelligent perception.** The steward is not commended for his ethics (he is a son of this age/world) but for his accurate perception of his master’s nature. He correctly reads his master. The steward experiences extraordinary mercy at the beginning of the story. He opts to risk everything in the confidence that this mercy and generosity are at the core of his master’s identity. If he is wrong, he will lose everything, including the freedom of his family. His judgment regarding his master is confirmed. Jesus longs for his disciples to have the same informed perception of God.
5. **The steward’s willingness to act.** The steward has the courage to act on his deepest perceptions. It is a huge risk but one he takes.

Julian was wrong. Jesus does not teach his disciples to lie and cheat. Using the psychology of an oppressed peasantry, Jesus creates a parable with profound theological and ethical resonances.⁵

NOTEs from Book:

⁵ Bailey, K. E. (2008). *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (pp. 332–342). Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.



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Luke 16:1–9

How can such a confusing parable turn out to offer such clear good news?

You've probably heard the popular adage, "It's not the destination; it's the journey." There's a lot of truth in it. We should learn to enjoy the processes of life, the day-to-day comings and goings. Don't just live head down, nose to the grindstone, pressing on toward lofty goals. Stop and smell the roses. Breathe deeply. Enjoy your fellow travelers. We miss too many of life's joys and blessings when we are so purpose-driven, goal-oriented, and seminar-motivated.

However, this "enjoy the journey" can also be nothing more than a sequel to the ancient motto, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Embedded in this call to "smell the roses" is a long-recognized fatalism that does not square with truth. Ultimately, the destination validates the journey and brings the only lasting meaning to the things we attempt to enjoy.

As I write this chapter, one of my daughters has just delivered her third child. Believe me, for her it definitely was *not* the journey; it was the destination: *Get me to the hospital! There is one place and one place only I want to be, and I want to be there now!* What is it that helped her through the nauseating first trimester; the enormous discomforts of the third trimester; and the sharp, unrelenting contractions of a thirty-six-hour delivery? The promise of a destination that's worth it all. Holding a new gift from God in her arms.

For most people, life's journey consists of pleasant seasons to be enjoyed and dark days to be endured. The ratio of sunny to stormy days varies from person to person and even nation to nation. Certainly, wealthy nations have luxuries that make the hard times more bearable and often more avoidable. But all people go through extended hard times. And many people learn how to savor the smallest blessings and detect the slightest waft of a pleasant fragrance even amid the acrid atmosphere of war, destruction, drought, poverty, disease, and hunger. What makes that possible is a sustaining sense of something worth living for. A purpose. A distant landmark of promise, a horizon of hope for tomorrow.

My mom was eighty-six when she died. She lived in our home her final ten years. During her last four years, she dealt with (in chronological order) a separated shoulder that required months of therapy, the removal of her left lung at the same time my dad was dying, colon cancer and surgery, a heart attack, a stroke that robbed her of speech for the last three years of her life, and a broken hip necessitating more therapy.

George MacDonald referred to the body in old age as "undressing for its last sweet bed."¹ But my mom's plight was not just a matter of those creeping losses. She never did "rage against the dying of the light" as Dylan Thomas poetically urged. Her later days were a complete muzzling of all forms of communication. Imagine getting to the place where you can't even make your right hand sign "Love, Mom" on your children's Christmas cards. She heroically tried to enjoy the journey, but ultimately not much was left in her but the longing for release and repose at her final destination. For many old folks, waking up and facing a new day is harder than anything I have yet to do in life. The only things that keep them going are the destination and some perfectly timed sensations of the nearness of Jesus.

So join me in taking a somewhat countercultural position in affirming the ultimate importance of *the destination*. That perspective seems to fit a major theme of Scripture reiterated in numerous ways, as we are told to

- set our heart and minds on things above (Col. 3:1–2).
- be like the heroes of our faith, who pursued a kingdom beyond this earth (Heb. 11:13–16).
- be like Jesus, who endured the cross because of the joy set before Him (Heb. 12:2).
- endure suffering patiently, knowing that we are achieving a far greater weight of glory (2 Cor. 4:17).
- endure persecution, knowing that a crown of life awaits (Rev. 2:10).

If you happen to currently enjoy the privilege of a comfortable life on earth, one full of opportunities for travel, discovery, and pleasures of your choosing (i.e., a satisfying journey), do not be lured into the cultural trap of neglecting the future. Press on toward the prize of the high calling we have in Christ. Jesus—knowing Him, loving Him, serving Him, and joining Him—is your destination. Count everything else as garbage in comparison (Phil. 3:8–14).

Why am I getting preachy about this? There's no way to make sense of the confusing parable we're about to discuss without turning your mind from an "enjoy the journey" mentality and shifting toward a destination mentality. It's a parable driven entirely by concern for future well-being and how to achieve it.

Where the Confusion Sneaks In

As I said, this is a very confusing parable, because it seems to applaud the self-serving behavior of a person who sought to achieve a desired result through shady—or what is too graciously called "shrewd"—methods. Here's what he did.



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As the manager of a rich man's possessions, he had been irresponsible and wasteful enough to get called into the corner office and be given a two-week termination notice. Now he had to think fast and develop a fallback plan before his final day at work, because he was a lazy bum too soft for hard work and too proud for panhandling (Luke 16:3).

Apparently, he had enough time to contact a few clients and discount their bills substantially enough to believe it might create a network of friends who would help him weather the storm until he found another job he could slither into. Here's how Jesus described his shrewd scheme:

"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?"

"Nine hundred gallons of olive oil," he replied.

The manager told him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty."

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." (vv. 4–7)

In the next verse, Jesus used a word that sparks much confusion. He said, "The master *commended* the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly" (v. 8).

The word *commended* makes us cock our heads as we struggle with what seems to be an approved behavior. The rich master valued and surprisingly approved the shrewd strategy of this admittedly dishonest manager. But even more shockingly, on the surface Jesus seemed to have joined that commendation by acknowledging that "people of this world" do a better job of being "shrewd" than God's people (v. 8). The Greek word translated "shrewd" in this verse usually has a very positive connotation—doing something beneficial—and is ordinarily translated "wise." Then Jesus went so far as to urge people to use monetary leverage to make friends for an ulterior purpose like the dishonest manager (v. 9).

Jesus seemed to have been saying that just as the dishonest manager connived a way to use money to make friends and secure his future welcome, we should do something similar to gain "friends" and ensure our welcome into an eternal home. Why does Jesus seem to have applauded such scheming?

Hoping to clear up the confusion, some commentators provide very helpful information about first-century business practices and the meaning of "friends" in this culture of hospitality. That is important information. But I want us to try to solve the puzzle by simply sticking to the text.

Contrast not Comparison

Unlike many of Jesus' parables, this one flows seamlessly from the story of the parable (Luke 16:1–8) to Jesus' commentary on it (vv. 9–13). It's hard to know—and, apparently, it's not important for us to know—where one ends and the other begins. Jesus seemingly didn't want us to draw a sharp line. Consequently, His commentary can help us understand the story's point. When we do that, we discover Jesus was not making a comparison at all. Instead, He was making a stark contrast.

- He talked about gaining welcome into people's earthly homes versus welcome into eternal dwellings (vv. 4, 9).
- He contrasted the shrewdness of worldly people with the lack of shrewdness of God's people (v. 8).
- He distinguished between trustworthiness and dishonesty (vv. 10–12).
- He concluded with a very strong contrast between serving God and serving money (v. 13). I say "a very strong contrast" because scholars tell us that in this culture it was common for slaves to serve two masters who had a cooperative agreement. So when Jesus said, "You *cannot* serve both God and money," He was claiming that it is impossible. There can be no cooperative agreement whatsoever between these two masters.

Jesus emphasized all these points of contrast when He turned to the listening and sneering Pharisees (v. 14), looked them in the eyes, and made a final, most telling contrast, one that helps us understand the parable: "What people value highly is detestable in God's sight" (v. 15).

That one comment clarifies the parable, for it tells us *not* to see the rich master's commendation as a good thing. Yes, the master valued and commended the dishonest manager's actions. But now we know, because Jesus spoke plainly about the stark contrast, that the rich man commended something that God detests. Ah, good to know. Now we can return to the parable and work through it, reassured that we are not supposed to admire or emulate the shrewd manager.

Take God Out of It



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Based on what we just discovered, we now realize that the rich master in the story *does not* represent God. Because so many parables position a master, king, or father as a God figure, it becomes habitual to assume that the authoritative figure in any parable represents God. This is not always the case, and it is definitely *not* the case in this parable.

In this parable, nothing about the rich man gives insight into God's nature, values, or behavior. Because of what we have already seen, we know that both the dishonest manager and the rich man are part of and functioning within an ungodly value system.

The Use of Possessions

As we have already seen, this parable must be read as a study in contrasts. Since it kicks off with a focus on accountability for the use of the rich man's possessions, we should concentrate on that as **the fundamental contrast Jesus sought to illustrate. The shrewd manager's use and misuse of his master's possessions were detailed and clear: he was wasteful, corrupt, self-serving, and self-protecting. With whom is he being contrasted? The contrasting party is only implied. Jesus was calling His disciples to function differently, as bona fide "people of the light" (Luke 16:8).** They were to use their heavenly Master's possessions in a way exactly opposite of what the shrewd manager did. If they lived by a contrasting set of values, they were promised eternal well-being, though not necessarily immediate well-being (v. 9).

So what way is the exact opposite of how the shrewd manager used the rich man's funds? The opposite of wasteful, corrupt, self-serving, and self-protecting. What kind of practical use does that imply? Here we must bring in the larger context of Jesus' teaching about the use of money and possessions. When we do that, there is no doubt He was talking about serving the poor, those who can do nothing for us and who cannot make it without us. All the gospel writers made this clear, but Luke elevated that theme through some of Jesus' quotations that he uniquely selected for his gospel.

- "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (4:18–19).
- "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. Sell your possessions and give to the poor" (12:31–33).
- "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (14:12–14).

Then Luke continued emphasizing poverty relief in the book of Acts when he called special attention to the early Christians' Spirit-created concern for the poor.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. . . . There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. (4:32–35)

These and many other allusions to poverty relief in Luke-Acts create an unmistakable context for understanding what Jesus considered the faithful use of worldly wealth in this parable.

If you are like me, this emphasis on rescuing the poor is not anything new, but my commitment to kingdom values like that constantly needs renewal. I tend to drift away from them. Everything we have been given belongs to God, not us, and is to be used in ways that fulfill our Master's desires. The Lord wants us to be as "shrewd" as the dishonest manager. But that shrewdness with its animal instinct for selfish gain must be tamed by a compassionate heart for those who God prioritizes: those who are poor in some way. This is a challenge, yet in that very fact we also find incredibly good news.

Divine Poverty Relief

In my prayerful preparation for writing this chapter, one morning I found myself disappointed in myself for a variety of reasons. A month earlier I had suffered a severe bicycling accident that resulted in eight rib fractures, a life flight to a trauma center, and a long recovery time. Consequently, I was less focused and productive than I wanted to be about meeting some of my deadlines. I felt like I lost steam and concentration. To top it off, I knew I had allowed the deadlines to rob me of devotional times with the Lord.

Then in my prayer time that morning—the first one I'd had in more than a week—as I sheepishly approached the Lord, asking for His help with this parable, I sensed Him saying, *I don't expect anything of the "people of the light"*



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that I am not doing Myself. After all, I am the light. I am all about giving everything I have to those who are poor. If I am expecting you to regard the poor with generosity, wouldn't I be regarding you in the same way? When you are poor in effort, when you are poor in strength, when you are poor in wisdom or diligence or conviction, don't come to Me in shame. Come to Me in confidence and faith. I already am the kind of person I want you to be. So when you are poor in spirit, guess what? That's exactly when I plan to give you the kingdom of heaven. There's a reason I made that My very first beatitude.

Perhaps this parable leaves you overwhelmed with the standard of self-sacrifice Jesus set, unsure about the cost, but certain about having fallen short. If this challenging parable ultimately presents us with the Master's demand, then it also reveals His nature. When you lack the necessary compassion, He will provide you with the resources of heart and mind necessary to handle His wealth—material or spiritual—in ways that please Him. Consequently, in this life we get to sample the riches of God's eternal kingdom, our eternal home into which we will one day be welcomed. This one truth makes the journey almost as grand as the destination.

20/20 Focus

1. If you're like most people, something strikes you as wrong about the behavior of the shrewd manager, even though the rich man commended him. Don't just "feel" that way; try to put it into words. Things often become clearer when you hunt for the right words.
2. Why do you think the master commended the dishonest manager? What impressed him? What did Jesus want us to be impressed by?
3. Ultimately, hearing Jesus call the worldly values and resulting behavior of the shrewd manager "detestable in God's sight" brings us relief. What do you think falls into that category of detestable values?
4. For a refresher in what God highly values, read aloud Jeremiah 5:23–29; 22:3–5. Where might your values need to align more closely with the Lord's?

Lord Jesus, this was a hard chapter for me to read. I am prone to neglect the poor—to see them as victims of their own poor choices; to absolve myself of responsibility based on my own needs for money, shelter, and safety; and to take wise steps to secure my own future as my priority. This parable calls me to a different value system. I'm going to need the Holy Spirit's help to live out those values, especially since I'm often unaware of the times I'm caught up in the world's values. Please help. Amen.

Vision Check

Our instincts are notoriously untrustworthy, especially when compared with the trustworthiness of God's Word. Yet sometimes your gut makes you wonder whether the widely held understanding of some portion of God's Word is correct. In those times, it is appropriate to question—humbly!—whether the common point of view is correct.

Here's a controversial contemporary issue to consider. Read Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 14:34 about women keeping silent in church. How does your gut react to that? The point is not to force your opinion to change but to let your mind follow your gut long enough to rethink the issue in relation to the whole counsel of God. Maybe something new will come to mind. Maybe not. At least you're giving the Lord a chance to help you see something with fresh eyes. Feel free to compare your thoughts with mine on dougnewton.com or the Fresh Eyes app. Newton, D. (2018). [Fresh eyes on Jesus' parables: discovering new insights in familiar passages.](#) Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook.

16:1–12. The contextual connection of the story of the unjust steward with the parable of the prodigal son is perhaps that both deal with wasting and abusing worldly goods. Verse 14 also takes notice of the covetous audience. The plot is that a rich man, upon discovering wastefulness in his steward, was going to dismiss him (vs. 12). To protect his future, the steward immediately began making friends on the outside by juggling the goods in favor of those who owed the master (vss. 3–7). The story continues to have the master commend the unjust steward for his prudence (vs. 8).

Many see a problem as to why Jesus used such a character as the unjust steward, and even told of his commendation. Christ could simply be stressing the use of one's money and influence to aid others for Christ's sake (vss. 9–12), but this does not seem to be it entirely. There are, of course, some valuable character qualities in the unjust steward that are worthy of imitation, including his quick decisiveness, his self-collectedness, his energy, and his tact. But the main lesson seems to lie in the larger idea of realizing he is about to be dismissed and doing something about it. Men should realize that death comes as a certainty, and that they must prepare properly for what comes afterward.⁶

WORD WEALTH

16:4 **put out**, *methistemi* (meth-is-tay-mee); Strong's #3179: Literally, "to set aside." The word indicates a change from one place to another, a removal, a transfer, a relocation. The action involved may be either positive (Col. 1:13) or negative (Luke 16:4).⁷

⁶ Hindson, E. E., & Kroll, W. M. (Eds.). (1994). *KJV Bible Commentary* (p. 2050). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁷ Hayford, J. W. (Ed.). (1997). *Spirit filled life study Bible* (electronic ed., Lk 16:1). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.



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Parable #9:

Luke 10:30-37 (ESV)

Round 1:

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” ²⁷ And he answered, “You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

Round 2:

²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii^[a] and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

What does this parable mean?

Standard view:

What God means by ‘neighborly’

Alternative view:

This is what love does. Period.

TEAM ASK: [Doug Newton speaks greatly about love that works for prevention...WHAT ARE THOSE WAYS IN OUR SOCIETY?]

What does it teach us about the Kingdom of God?

How does this glimpse into what the Kingdom of God is like affect my thinking? My actions? My life?

Notes from Middle Eastern Eyes:

22

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

LUKE 10:25–37



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THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN is famous for its **ethics**, and rightly so. This chapter will also look at the theology and Christology contained within it. First is the dialogue setting in which the parable appears.

DIALOGUE

Like a diamond in a gold ring, this parable is set in two rounds of dialogue between Jesus and a specialist in the religious law (a “lawyer”). If the story is removed from that dialogue, significant aspects of the parable are missed. The interpreter is not a “disembodied eye,” as Lesslie Newbigin has observed, looking down on the world from 100,000 miles in space. Rather, every interpreter is influenced by his or her country’s language, culture, history, economics, politics and military. The authors of the Gospels have given us the parables of Jesus in first-century settings. To strip away those settings is to substitute our own. Luke presents his readers with two rounds of a dialogue. The first round is shown in figure 22.1.

Initially, the lawyer asks a question (1). Jesus does not answer but puts his own question to the lawyer (2). The lawyer then answers Jesus’ question, and finally Jesus responds to the lawyer’s query. In short, the lawyer asks, “What must I *do* to inherit eternal *life*?” Jesus does not reply but asks, “What about the law?” The lawyer responds, “You must love God and your neighbor.” Jesus concludes this opening interchange with, “If you *do this*, you will *live*.” This section of the dialogue opens and closes with “do” and “live.”

Jesus and the lawyer then engage in a second round of dialogue. Again, the lawyer begins with a question that is actually a follow-up of his original query. This second exchange follows the same form of question (3), question (4), answer to 4, and finally reply to 3. The bare bones of this second round of dialogue are illustrated in figure 22.2. And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying,

- | | |
|--|---------------------|
| 1. “Teacher, what shall I <i>do</i> to inherit eternal <i>life</i> ?” | LAWYER: Question 1 |
| 2. He said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read?” | JESUS: Question 2 |
| 3. And he answered, “You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.” | LAWYER: Answer to 2 |
| 4. And he said to him, “You have answered right; <i>do this</i> , and you will <i>live</i> .” | JESUS: Answer to 1 |

Figure 22.1. First dialogue (Lk 10:25–28)]

He, desiring to *justify himself*, said to Jesus,

- | | |
|---|---------------------|
| 5. “And who is my neighbor?” | LAWYER: Question 3 |
| 6. Jesus replied, “A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho ...” [the parable follows] “Which of these three became a neighbor?” | JESUS: Question 4 |
| 7. Lawyer: “The one who showed mercy on him.” | LAWYER: Answer to 4 |
| 8. Jesus: “Go and continue <i>doing</i> likewise.” | JESUS: Answer to 3 |



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Figure 22.2. Second dialogue (Lk 10:29–30; 36–37)

The lawyer opens with a question (3). Jesus does not directly answer that question but chooses to tell a story, at the end of which he asks a question (4), which is, “Which of these three *became a neighbor?*” The story serves to introduce the fourth question. The lawyer answers Jesus’ question (4), and Jesus’ final comment is a response to the lawyer’s question (3). Both rounds in this dialogue focus on the question, “What must *I do* to inherit eternal life?” The parable functions within this debate composed of four questions and four answers.

In Middle Eastern traditional culture the teacher sits and the student shows respect for the teacher by standing to recite. But in this instance the lawyer *stands* in order to *test* the teacher. (“Teacher” is Luke’s word for rabbi.) As Ibrahim Sa’id of Egypt notes in his Arabic commentary on this parable, there is a built-in deception. He is standing to ask a question, like a humble student trying to learn something, but his purpose is to test/examine the teacher.

Ibn al-Tayyib has an extended discussion of this opening exchange between Jesus and the lawyer. He notes that the lawyer did not ask, “How can I obey God,” which is the natural question for a religious lawyer to ask, but, “How can I inherit eternal life?” Ibn al-Tayyib offers two explanations for the lawyer’s special interest. He suggests, “The **first** is that it was the custom of the Savior of all to teach those who came to him, indeed, those who were drawn to him, on the subject of eternal life.” **Second** is that the lawyer imagined he could trap Jesus by means of his answer and then take even some trivial word and shape it into evidence that Jesus’ enemies could fashion into a denial of the validity of the law of Moses.

Ibn al-Tayyib argues that Jesus’ refusal to give a direct answer to the lawyer’s question is because Jesus understands what the lawyer is trying to do. Jesus obliges the lawyer to expose his own views on the law of Moses. His methodology was to invoke the lawyer’s reaction to a related question and then use that response to answer the original question.

Actually, the lawyer’s original question is flawed. **What can anyone do to inherit anything?** Inheritance, by its very nature, is a gift from one family member (or friend) to another. If you are born into a family, or perhaps adopted into it, then you can inherit. **Inheritance is not payment for services rendered. The questioner in this story is a religious lawyer who is fully aware of such things.**

On the other hand, this kind of discussion regarding eternal life was taking place among the rabbis in the first century. In keeping with that debate, Jesus asks the lawyer what he thinks about the topic. The lawyer responds with a summary of Jesus’ view, which was “love God and love your neighbor.” Had he heard Jesus present this summary of the law on some previous occasion? Perhaps. In any case, some first-century rabbis had their own summaries of the law.

A “heathen” approached the famous Rabbi Shammai shortly before the time of Jesus, stood on one foot and said, “Teach me the whole Law while I stand on one foot.” Shammai got angry and drove him away. The man then went to Rabbi Hillel, the founder of the other famous rabbinic school of the first century, and posed the same challenge. Hillel responded, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.” This is easily recognized as a negative form of the Golden Rule. Jesus apparently took Hillel’s reply and turned it into a positive.⁶

The lawyer may have quoted Jesus’ summary of the law in order to hear what Jesus would say. Notice, however, that this summary contains two parts: “love God” and “love your neighbor.” The two parts come from the Old Testament; the commandment to “love your neighbor” occurs in Leviticus 19:18, while the injunction to “love God” appears in Deuteronomy 6:5. One would expect such Scripture quotations to follow the canonical order. Instead, Jesus placed “love God” before the commandment to “love your neighbor.” The order is important. Experience dictates that it is very hard to love the unlovely neighbor until the disciple’s heart is filled with the love of God, which provides the energy and motivation necessary for the arduous task of loving the neighbor. Often the motives of the one who serves are misunderstood by the recipient of that love, who then responds with hostility rather than gratitude. If the one who serves is hoping to be sustained by the responses received, and if the expected responses are not forthcoming, that person may well give up in frustration and disappointment. But if costly acts of love are extended to others out of gratitude for the love of God, then the believer is sustained by the unwavering love of God toward him or her.

In summary, the lawyer quotes Jesus’ synopsis of the law (Mt 7:12; Lk 6:31). Jesus tells the lawyer, “Fine, follow your own advice. Live up to these standards and you will indeed inherit eternal life.” To inherit eternal life, all he must do is to consistently practice unqualified love for God and his neighbor.

Is Jesus thereby saying that salvation can be earned? Indeed, anyone who can meet such a standard does not need grace. But the standard is to love God unflinchingly with all one’s heart, mind, soul and strength, and consistently love the neighbor as much as the self. As Paul enunciates, the problem is not the law, the problem is that we cannot keep it (Rom 7:13–20). Here the standard set by Jesus eludes our finest efforts. To put it another way, the lawyer



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asks, “What must I *do* in order to inherit eternal *life*?” Jesus replies, “You must jump over this ten foot fence!” The lawyer should be able to see that he cannot jump that high and that he has thereby asked the wrong question. But he fails this expectation.

Instead, he repeats his question in a different form. He apparently says to himself, “So, I must love God and my neighbor to earn my salvation. Fine, what I need now is a few definitions. To love God is to keep the law. I already know that. What I need is some clarification of *exactly* who is and who is not my neighbor. Once I have clarification on this point I can proceed.”

Luke (or the tradition given to him) helps us understand what is going through the lawyer’s mind by including, “He, desiring to *justify himself*, asked, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ ” To *be justified* is to be saved, and to be saved is to “inherit eternal life.” **To be justified, in biblical language, means to be granted the status of one whom God accepts as he stands before God.** This fellow, desiring to *justify himself* is clearly a person who wants “to achieve acceptance before God on his own.”

So he asks, “Who is my neighbor?” As a good first-century Jew, he expects Jesus to respond with a list that the lawyer hopes he can manage. The neighbor will naturally include his fellow Jew who keeps the law in a precise fashion. Gentiles are not neighbors and everyone knows God hates the Samaritans, so they certainly do not qualify as neighbors. After all, he could read Leviticus 19:18 which commands, “You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD,” and conclude that his neighbor was limited to “the sons of your own people.” Such a reading would be easy even though inaccurate because the conclusion of the chapter commands: “The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Lev 19:34). The lawyer might have preferred Psalm 139:21–22 which reads:

Do I not hate them that hate thee, O LORD?
And do I not loathe them that rise up against thee?
I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies.

The tendency to read Scripture selectively is an old problem. With a careful line drawn between those who are and those who are not his neighbors, the lawyer would be equipped to earn his way to eternal life.

How would Jesus define “the neighbor” for the lawyer? Would it be, “The son of your own house?” Or will he choose, “The stranger who sojourns with you?” In either case, on the basis of these texts, the lawyer could hardly have imagined anything beyond “my family” and “the stranger who lives in my town.”

SEVEN SCENES OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Jesus responds to the lawyer’s question by creating the classical story of the good Samaritan.

Ibn al-Tayyib has a long discussion of whether the parable is built on an historical incident or whether it is fiction. He grants that the message of the parable is the same either way, but at the same time he tells a story he heard from the Jewish community in southern Iraq in the eleventh century. The story is set in the aftermath of 2 Kings 17:24–38. In that text the King of Assyria brings foreign tribes to live in Samaria who do not “fear the LORD.” The Lord sends lions to eat the people, and the King of Assyria responds by returning “priests whom they had carried away” to teach the people about the “god of the land.” The project was only partially successful. The story told to Ibn al-Tayyib builds on the fall-out of that partial success. It reads:

The children of Israel say: When the priest [of 2 Kings 17:24–38] came and taught the people how to fear the Lord, the lions were cut off from them, but after some time, they returned [to their old ways] and the lions returned. When this happened, the priest and the Levite who was with him fled, escaping it all. At that time there was a Jew who worked in a vineyard. That man took his pay and traveled from Jerusalem to Jericho. On the way he met a group of men from one of the tribes with whom Moses and Joshua, the son of Nun had fought. The group attacked him to exact blood vengeance [*thar*]. They beat him, took his clothes and left him with barely a breath remaining, that is, as one dead. The priest passed by ignoring him, as did the Levite. Then it happened that a Babylonian was traveling from Jerusalem and when he saw him he had mercy on him and felt compassion for him. So he took out some wine and some oil and bound up his wounds. When the wounded man could not move, that is, because he did not have the strength to walk, he placed him on his own riding animal and took him to a hotel in Jericho. There he commended him to the owner of the hotel and gave the wounded man two denars for the expenses of his journey and said if the situation required more than two denars, “When I come back I will give you more.” This story then became a rebuke to the sons of Israel and spread throughout the land and the man who carried out this noble deed



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was called “Samaritan” because he was from the protectors, that is from among the guards [police] of Samaria.

It is curious that Ibn al-Tayyib recounts this as a Jewish story told by the Babylonian Jewish community in Iraq in the eleventh century. He did not hear it as an Iraqi Christian story told about the Jews. The hero of the story is not a Jew, so it is impossible to imagine that the Jewish community invented the account to make their own people appear noble. Its Jewish connection with the account in 2 Kings emphasizes its Jewish roots. I can think of no reason for seeing the connection with 2 Kings as a Christian interpolation into the Old Testament record. Ibn al-Tayyib affirms that this story was used as evidence among commentators known to him who insisted that the parable of the good Samaritan was based on a historical incident. Ibn al-Tayyib concludes that whether it is creative fiction or historical incident, the parable has the same meaning.

Even if this story is a post-first-century legend influenced by the parable, it is of interest. For our purposes, it is important to observe that the wounded man was a Jew, blood vengeance was part of the story, and the hotel was in Jericho. Turning to the text with this Eastern story in mind, the parable falls into seven scenes that follow a time-honored model older than the writing prophets. I have named it The Prophetic Rhetorical Template. These scenes are shown in figure 22.3.

THE RHETORIC

Isaiah 28:14–18 and Psalm 23 are also prophetic rhetorical templates. There are seven scenes in all, seven being the perfect number. The climax is at the center, and the last three scenes are linked to the first three (in an inverted order). The parallels are strong and clear. In scene 1 the robbers take all the man’s possessions, and in scene 7 the Samaritan pays for the man out of his own resources because the man has nothing. In scene 2 the priest fails to transport the wounded man to safety, and in scene 6 the Samaritan fulfills that costly act. The Levite in scene 3 could at least have bound up the man’s wounds, and in the matching scene 5 the Samaritan compensates for this failure. The center climax describes the Samaritan’s compassion. These details reveal that the story is fashioned, in its present form, by a Jew, using Jewish rhetorical features and recorded for Jewish readers.

COMMENTARY

With the above parallels in mind, we turn to the seven scenes. First, scene 1.

- | | | |
|----|---|---|
| 1. | A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho
and he fell among <i>robbers</i> .
And they stripped him and beat him
and departed, leaving him half dead. | ROBBERS
Steal and Injure |
| 1. | A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho,
and he fell among <i>robbers</i> .
And they stripped him and beat him
and departed, leaving him half dead. | ROBBERS
Steal and Injure |
| 2. | Now by coincidence a certain <i>priest</i> was going down that road,
and when he saw him,
he passed by on the other side. | PRIEST
See
Do nothing |
| 3. | Likewise also a <i>Levite</i> came to that place,
and when he saw him,
he passed by on the other side. | LEVITE
See
Do nothing |
| 4. | And a certain <i>Samaritan</i> , traveling,
came to him,
and when he saw him,
he had compassion on him. | SAMARITAN
See and show
compassion |



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- 5. He went to him,
and bound up his wounds,
pouring on oil and wine. TREAT WOUNDS
(The Levite’s failure)

- 6. Then he put him on his own riding animal
and led him (it) to the inn,
and took care of him. TRANSPORT THE MAN
(The Priest’s failure)

- 7. The next day he took out and gave
two denarii to the manager and said,
“Take care of him, and whatever more you
spend
I, on my return, I will repay you.”
“Which of these three, do you think,
proved neighbor to the man who fell among the
robbers?”
He said, “The one who showed mercy on him.”
And Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” SPEND MONEY ON HIM
(Compensating for the thieves)

Figure 22.3. The parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37)

A gang of cutthroats “stripped him and beat him.” Robbers in the Middle East are known to beat their victims only if they resist. It can be assumed, therefore, that this poor fellow made this mistake and consequently suffered a severe beating and was left naked and unconscious on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The wounded man is naturally assumed to be a Jew. The wounded man in Ibn al-Tayyib’s story is a Jew. The significance of this detail is seen later. Scene 2 features the priest.

- 2. Now by coincidence a certain *priest*
was going down that road, PRIEST
and when he saw him, See
he passed by on the other side. Do nothing

The temple in Jerusalem was served by three classes of people. Priests comprised the first, the second was the Levites, and the third were laymen who helped with various aspects of the life of the temple. All three are important to the story. **The priest** was on his way down the mountain from Jerusalem to Jericho. Many of the priests in the first century lived in Jericho. They would go up to Jerusalem for a two-week assignment and then return to their homes in Jericho. This priest fits easily into such a pattern and may well have been on his way home from the sacred precincts of the temple.

Priests were a hereditary guild and were known to be wealthy. Menahem Stern writes, “Towards the close of the Second Temple period, the priesthood constituted the prestigious and elite class in Jewish society.” As a person of means, the priest would not be hiking seventeen miles down the hill when he could easily afford to ride. **A Middle Eastern listener to the story would assume that the rich priest was riding. He could well have transported the man to help.**

Then, as now, various ethnic communities in the Middle East are identified by their clothes, their language or their accent. In the first century, Jewish scholars could speak Hebrew while peasants spoke Aramaic. Along the Phoenician coast, people still used the Phoenician language. Around the Sea of Galilee, Syriac was in use. The Greek cities naturally conversed in Greek, and tribesman in the south spoke Arabic. Government officials would have known Latin. **Language, dress and accent—with these three ethnic and class markers it was easy to distinguish “them from us.”**

But the priest had a special problem. The wounded man beside the road was unconscious and stripped. If the victim was a fellow Jew, and especially a law-abiding Jew, the priest would have been responsible to reach out and help him. But this victim was naked and unconscious, so how could anyone be sure of his ethnic-linguistic identity? No doubt, the priest wanted to do his duty under the law. But what was his duty?



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The wounded man could have been dead. If so the priest who approached him would become ceremonially defiled, and if defiled he would need to return to Jerusalem and undergo a week-long process of ceremonial purification. It would take some time to arrange such things. Meanwhile, he could not eat from the tithes or even collect them. The same ban would apply to his family and servants. Distribution to the poor would also have been impossible. What’s more, the victim along the road might have been Egyptian, Greek, Syrian or Phoenician, in which case, the priest was not responsible under the law to do anything. If the priest approached the beaten man and touched him and the man later died, the priest would have been obliged to rend his robes, and in so doing would have violated laws against the destruction of valuable property. The poor priest did not have an easy time trying to determine his duty under the law. **After deciding that his ceremonial purity was too important to risk he continued on his way.**

The decision was freighted with danger. If the priest became defiled and tried to serve at the altar in a state of uncleanness, he could suffer the following fate: “his brethren the priests did not bring him to the court, but the young men among the priests took him outside the Temple Court and split open his brain with clubs.” Even the risk of being accused would be frightening.

Scene 3 introduces the Levite.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|------------|
| 3. Likewise also a <i>Levite</i> | |
| came to that place, | LEVITE |
| and when he saw him, | See |
| he passed by on the other side. | Do nothing |

The Levites functioned in the temple as assistants to the priests. This particular Levite probably knew that a priest was ahead of him on the road and may have been an assistant to that same priest. Since the priest had set a precedent, the Levite could pass by with an easy conscience. Should a mere Levite upstage a priest? Did the Levite think he understood the law better than the priest? Furthermore, the Levite might have to face that same priest in Jericho that night. Could the Levite ride into Jericho with a wounded man whom the priest, in obedience to his understanding of the law, had opted to ignore? Such an act would be an insult to the priest!

Scene 4 features the Samaritan.

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| 4. And a certain <i>Samaritan</i> , traveling, came to him, | SAMARITAN |
| and when he saw him, | See |
| he had compassion on him. | Compassion |

Stories that establish a series also set a direction. If a contemporary story begins with a bishop and then introduces a priest, the third person in the story is expected to be a deacon. If a first-century Jewish story introduces a priest, then a Levite, the third person down the road is and should be a Jewish layman. But this is not what happens.

Scene 4 explodes in the faces of its listeners. The hero of the story is not a Jewish layman but a hated outsider. I doubt if settlers in the American West told stories in the nineteenth century with “a good Indian” as the hero of those tales. The wounded man in the Jewish story told by Ibn al-Tayyib was a Jew. Here the parable assumes the wounded man to be a Jew. It would have been more acceptable to the audience if Jesus had told a story about a good *Jew* who helped a wounded *Samaritan* on the way to Shechem. The Jewish audience might have managed to praise a “good Jew” even though he helped a hated Samaritan. It is, however, a different matter to tell a story about a good Samaritan who helps a wounded Jew, especially after the Jewish priest and Levite fail to turn aside to assist the unconscious stranger!

Unlike the two travelers on the road before him, **the Samaritan** is moved with compassion. The saving agent in the story breaks in from the outside, binds up the man’s wounds, and pours oil and wine on them. Origen, Ambrose, Augustine and Ibn al-Tayyib **all identify the Samaritan as a symbol for Jesus**, and rightly so. This identification is freighted with meaning:

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 5. He went to him, | TREAT WOUNDS |
| and bound up his wounds, | (The Levite’s failure) |
| pouring on oil and wine. | |

First aid must be administered before the man can be moved. Greek grammar allows for the binding of a wound and the pouring on of oil and wine to occur together. Syriac and Arabic versions of this text, following Semitic grammar, can only describe two actions; binding wounds and then pouring on oil and wine. Is this backward? Surely



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the Samaritan would first clean the wound with oil, then disinfect it with wine before finally binding it? But a deep cut is often bound before medication is poured onto the wound through the bandage. In the first century, oil and wine were sometimes mixed to form a medication for wounds. It is difficult to make a case for the significance of the order of the actions. **What matters is that the Samaritan is using all his available resources (oil, wine, a cloth wrapping, riding animal, time, energy and money) to care for the wounded man.** Ibn al-Tayyib comments:

Yes, indeed, love that fails to give money [darahim] as charity or as alms is common in the world, but heartfelt love that is free from the seeking of praise or honor and which is willing to endure distress, suffering and loss, in the path of good works, such as is set forth in this parable, is extraordinarily rare.

Ibn al-Tayyib understands instinctively that the Samaritan is paying a high price to assist the wounded man.

6. Then he put him on his own riding animal TRANSPORT THE MAN
and led him [it] to the inn, **(The Priest's failure)**
and took care of him.

The Samaritan then risks his life by transporting the wounded man to an inn within Jewish territory. Such inns were found in villages, not in the wilderness. There are no archaeological remains to indicate that there was an inn in the midst of the wilderness between Jerusalem and Jericho at the time of Jesus. The listener to the story would naturally expect the Samaritan to take the wounded man down to Jericho where an inn could be found, as Ibn al-Tayyib's story confirms. The Samaritan is expected to unload the wounded man at the edge of Jericho and disappear. A Samaritan would not be safe in a Jewish town with a wounded Jew over the back of his riding animal. Community vengeance may be enacted against the Samaritan, even if he has saved the life of the Jew. I have read of and personally witnessed these grim realities in the Middle East.

7. The next day he took out and gave SPEND MONEY ON HIM
two denarii to the manager and said,
"Take care of him, and whatever
more you spend **(Compensating for the thieves)**
I, on my return, I will repay you."

This last scene takes place the following day at the inn. Two denarii would have covered the bill for food and lodging for at least a week and perhaps two. **The overlooked reality of the Samaritan's final act is that he risks his life to care for this man in a Jewish inn.** Putting the story into an American context around 1850, suppose a Native American found a cowboy with two arrows in his back, placed the cowboy on his horse and rode into Dodge City. After checking into a room over the saloon, the man spent the night taking care of the cowboy. How would the people of Dodge City react to the Native American the following morning when he emerged from the saloon? Most Americans know that they would probably kill him even though he had helped a cowboy.

After the Samaritan paid his bill he had yet to escape the town. Was there a crowd awaiting him outside the inn? Was he beaten or killed? We do not know. The story is open-ended, and as with many of Jesus' parables the listener must supply the missing conclusion. **Why did the Samaritan expose himself to potential violence?**

At the time, people could be sold as slaves if they could not pay their debts. Jesus' parable of the unjust servant mentions this grim first-century reality (Mt 18:25). Any lodger in a commercial inn who could not pay his bill risked being sold as a slave by the innkeepers, who, in general, had bad reputations. This particular victim had nothing, not even clothes. The Samaritan was obliged to make a down payment and pledge himself to settle the final bill lest his rescue of the wounded man be in vain. Without such an extraordinary effort the Samaritan might as well have left the poor man to die in the wilderness.

In this parable the Samaritan extends a costly demonstration of unexpected love to the wounded man, and in the process Jesus again interprets the life-changing power of costly love that would climax at his cross.

The dialogue between Jesus and the lawyer concludes:

"Which of these three, do you think
proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"

He said, "The one who showed mercy on him."

And Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

The lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" is not answered. Instead, Jesus reflects on the larger question, "To whom must I become a neighbor?" The answer being: Anyone in need. At great cost, the Samaritan became a



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neighbor to the wounded man. The neighbor is the *Samaritan*, not the wounded man. In this connection Ibn al-Tayyib notes:

We see that the lawyer does not want to openly praise the Samaritan and thus refers to him obliquely without naming him. This answer comes from his conscience, but he is fearful of Jewish attitudes (toward Samaritans) with which he was raised. And if it were not for this parable he would never concede that the Samaritan was a neighbor to the wounded man.

Ibn al-Tayyib astutely observes that both Jesus and the lawyer identify the Samaritan as the one who becomes a neighbor even though it is not easy for the lawyer to do so in public.

On hearing the story the lawyer has a chance to see that he cannot justify himself (that is, earn eternal life), because what he is challenged to do is beyond his capacity. At the same time he and all readers of the parable, since its creation, are given a noble ethical model to imitate.

SUMMARY: THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

This parable contains both ethical and theological content. What are the “rooms in the house” that this parable creates? I would suggest the following:

1. *Eternal life—a gracious gift.* The lawyer is given a standard he cannot meet. In the process he has the opportunity to discover that he cannot earn eternal life, for it comes to him as a free gift.
2. *Becoming a neighbor.* The lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” is the wrong query. He is challenged to ask, “To whom must I become a neighbor?” The parable replies, “Your neighbor is anyone in need, regardless of language, religion or ethnicity.” Here compassion for the outsider has its finest expression in all Scripture. The ethical demands of this vision are limitless.
3. *The limits of the law.* Compassion reaches beyond the requirements of any law. The priest and the Levite cannot discover their duty solely by examining their code books.
4. *Racism.* The religious and racial attitudes of the community are under attack. The story could have been located in Samaria with a good Jew rescuing a wounded Samaritan. Instead, it is a hated Samaritan who (presumably) rescues a wounded Jew.
5. *Jesus the teacher.* Jesus’ skills as a teacher emerge. He does not answer the man’s questions but raises other questions, allowing the lawyer to answer his own queries. In the process the lawyer is challenged to expand his understanding of what faithfulness requires of him.
6. *Christology.* After the failure of the listeners’ religious leaders, the saving agent breaks in from outside to save, disregarding the cost of that salvation. Jesus is talking about himself.
7. *The cross.* The good Samaritan offers a costly demonstration of unexpected love. He risks his life by transporting a wounded Jew into a Jewish town and spending the night there. The wounded man will never be the same again. Jesus is demonstrating a part of the meaning of his own passion.⁸

NOTEs from Book:

10

Streetlights

The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:30–37

What if some parables had a second chapter?

Some people have called me a creative person, especially regarding my writing skills. To whatever degree that’s true, I know some of it came from my dad. Not that he was great shakes as a writer. But he had a habit of inventing words—so many words that my two brothers and I put together a *Dictionary of Erfisms* for my parents’ fortieth anniversary. *Erfisms*? you wonder. His middle name was Erford. Anyone with a name like that is destined for a life of eccentric elocution as an accidental neologue (one who makes up words). For example:

- *fizgig*: a euphemistic word for a laxative. The mere use of the term usually caused the desired result in my red-faced dad.
- *gingkos*: a versatile term of either endearment or exasperation that follows the exclamation “You . . .” depending on the prevailing mood of the observer of gingkish behavior.

My dad liked everything neat. He stacked his pocket change in order on the bedroom bureau every night. He thought that even though the English language includes verbs like *bollix*, *muss*, and *jounce*, it is not rich enough to provide words that fit every situation where one is in the act of putting something out of order. So he created new words that offered more precise nuances:

- *shuck*: to make a minute adjustment to the position of any heavy object, as in “Shuck it this way a hair.”
- *squudgin*: to twist, shift, or rumple any cloth surface or flexible object. Always follows the command, “Don’t . . .” as in “Don’t squudgin the tablecloth.”

⁸ Bailey, K. E. (2008). [Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels](#) (pp. 284–297). Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.



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You may not be someone who makes up quirky words, but most people have a creative streak in some area of their lives. You may be able to look at an empty vase and a handful of wildflowers and “see” how to arrange them into a lovely bouquet. Some people possess an ear for music and have taught themselves how to play piano or guitar. Although most people require detailed recipes when they cook, you might have a knack for experimenting with ingredients and spices to make new dishes.

My wife and I spent many years in the South and marveled at the way some of our friends could transform a simple report about going to the grocery store into an elaborate drama full of action and description that rivaled a bestselling novel. And even though laziness might be the underlying motivation, some people can invent new ways of completing menial tasks more quickly and with less effort. What creative person first thought of carving an inclined plane helically around a cylindrical rod to produce an object that holds wood together? Then some other creative person like my dad came along and invented a name for it: a screw.

One of my major purposes for this book has been to show that most of us could be more creative in our interaction with Scripture if we gave ourselves a little nudge. I want to offer one more example of what I mean and how to do it using the famous parable of the good Samaritan. This classic drama conveys Jesus’ answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29), and is central to the gospel message.

As you know, the parable tells of a victim of a violent robbery who was left to die not only by the thieves themselves but also by two Jewish passersby: a priest and a Levite. Then a despised Samaritan—a character Jesus introduced to shock His Jewish listeners—came along and provided life-saving compassion and comprehensive care.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by 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, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii 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.” (vv. 30–35)

Clearly, Jesus painted a portrait of self-sacrificing, risk-taking love as the only true fulfillment of the law of love. For generations God’s people have examined under a magnifying glass every detail of this incredible picture of mercy and grace.

It’s worth trying to understand why the priest and Levite did nothing to help. And we often try. The Samaritan’s multi-faceted act of compassion and rescue should be analyzed and imitated by every Christian in every generation in every cultural context. And we have those components—emergency response, thorough care, and ongoing support—clearly spelled out. The way Jesus used a Samaritan as an unlikely hero was one of His many attacks on ethnic prejudice. It highlights a primary goal of the gospel toward which Christians are called to work: to tear down *all* dividing walls of hostility, not just ones between God and people and between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14–16). Retrofitting the story for a new generation and culture is appropriate creative interaction with the text, and it is done often and done well.

Experimental Variations

However, there’s another way to interact creatively with biblical texts that I call “experimental variations.” Scientists do this in their research. As they test hypotheses, they change one component of the experiment, called the variable, and observe what happens. What happens if we heat the solution five degrees more? What happens if we heat the solution before we mix in the chlorine rather than after? What happens if we freeze the solution and store it for twenty-four hours before we heat it? They learn new things by making slight adjustments.

Similarly, experimental variations to a particular biblical passage can trigger creative interactions with the text and with God’s Spirit that produce fresh insights. Ask yourself, *What would happen if I changed just one story component?* Let’s do that with this parable by imagining what happened the days *after* the Samaritan rescued the victim and resumed his journey. You’ll see how that raises a new set of questions about how love should act.

The Next Three Days

Imagine the following scenario: the Samaritan mounted his donkey and headed once again toward Jericho. He passed the place where he had rescued the wounded traveler, grateful to God for his opportunity to save a person’s life.

Not more than a mile farther down the road, he couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw the form of another wounded traveler lying beside the road. When he saw him, he took pity on him and showed the same care to this traveler as he had to the one the day before.

The innkeeper was somewhat surprised to see the Samaritan bringing another wounded victim to his inn for care. But again the businessman was promised a return visit and reimbursement for any expenses beyond another two denarii (silver coins).

The Samaritan stayed the night and left the next morning, but not before taking a minute to count his money and calculate whether he had enough left for the time he planned to spend in Jericho.

By now he was two days overdue for his business in Jericho, and he hoped his friends would not be worrying about him. So he picked up his pace to make up for lost time.

About three hours down the road, but less than halfway, his heart sank when he saw in the distance the form of another man lying in the road. Worry shot through his mind: *I can’t believe this. Could this be yet another victim?*



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Sure enough. It was! *What shall I do? My time and money are running out.* He wished he hadn't noticed the victim. But there he lay in the middle of the road. There was no getting around the reality. He saw the wounds, heard the man's faint cry, and compassion welled up inside him, so he stopped, dressed the wounds, lifted the man onto his donkey, and returned to the inn.

The innkeeper, now quite confused and perhaps a little suspicious, reluctantly gave another room to yet another victim—reluctantly because the Samaritan now had to ask for special considerations, since he could not advance the innkeeper any money. He could only promise to pay the bill on his return. The innkeeper was not at all pleased.

The next morning, under considerable pressure from how his tardiness jeopardized his business and reputation, the Samaritan rode as fast as possible toward Jericho again. He felt deeply troubled. *What if I see another wounded traveler? The worry did not let up. Step after step, he feared what was around the next curve. I cannot be delayed again!*

Then sure enough, from a man lying off in the bushes, he heard a faint moan for help. “No way! I can't do this anymore!” the Samaritan shouted in agony, as he looked with longing to the other side of the road.

There you have it—an experimental variation on this famous parable that makes one hypothetical adjustment to the story: What if the same thing happened to the Samaritan numerous times, not just once? This question is worth asking for several reasons.

A Valid Variation

Basic research on the actual text reveals that this road was known to be very dangerous. It is reasonable to wonder how a person might respond to more than one occurrence of a desperate rescue situation. So it's historically valid.

It's also emotionally valid. My experimental Samaritan represents what people soon discover when they commit themselves to lives of compassion for the needy: the desperate problems never let up and soon threaten to drain them dry of time and resources. Even the most compassionate people are prone to pass by like the priest and Levite out of sheer exhaustion.

Finally, it is conceptually valid. The parable Jesus told answered not only the question “Who is my neighbor?” but also “How does true love behave?” Jesus painted the picture of thorough and tender caregiving. My experimental version that imagines the realistic possibility of serial robberies puts fresh eyes on this compassion question. How does love behave in cases of chronic violence and victimization?

Greater Measures

Put yourself in the experimental Samaritan's situation. By the time he had faced the same problem three times, and now a fourth, what might he begin to think? *I need a solution other than just loading these people on my donkey and trying to rescue them all by myself.* This is where the fresh eyes technique of “experimental variations” takes us: to deal with the fact that real life often presents us with rescue challenges that one person can't handle alone. In other words, love faces the prospect of ineffectiveness and refuses to stop until it develops strategies to solve bigger problems.

Think about that for a minute. If you faced this experimental but true-to-life situation, what solutions might love propose? Two strategic solutions come to my mind.

Rescue Teams

The experimental Samaritan needs help. He needs a team of on-call people who share his sense of compassion and his conviction that prioritizes desperate people's needs over his own. He would need to create an organization to take responsibility for developing and deploying that kind of person into the . . . Oh, wait a minute. I think one already exists. It's called the church.

Now do you see how this fresh eyes technique logically leads to another creative way of looking at the parable? Go back to the parable and ask these questions: What insights might I gain if I think of the priest, Levite, and Samaritan as different types of churches and the victim as a type of human need? What is my church avoiding or too busy to notice? Do our benevolence ministries go far enough to fully care for and restore damaged people? Yes, we serve a meal at Thanksgiving to needy people, but does that really do much to alleviate their struggle to make ends meet? In other words, take all the ideas that are commonly taught about the ways individuals should show love to broken people—emergency response, thorough care, and ongoing support—and apply them to your church.

So, for example, among the greatest problems that trap people in economic poverty is consumer debt. People trapped in consumer debt are like people who can never keep their heads above water, because their bills keep pushing them back under. For years, my wife and I have encouraged God's people to model gospel love by periodically helping to pay other people's credit card debts to give them a chance to keep their heads above water. We believe in this.

In his book *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author David Shipler documented how the smallest problems, like the need for eyeglasses or dental work, can derail working people's attempts to rise above poverty. When we come alongside a family and offer to make monthly payments on one of their debts until it is paid off, that usually frees them up so they can get their car repaired and get to work, pay for more reliable childcare, or accelerate their debt reduction in other areas. Although it's not a cure for poverty, this not only helps provide a better chance for them to keep their heads above water and gradually make it to dry ground, but it also is one of the best ways to demonstrate the nature of the cross of Christ: substitutionary debt payment. That is, Jesus paid our debt on our behalf.

Streetlights

If people keep getting robbed and beaten on the road, then put up streetlights! Even though this solution falls into the category of “Duh,” the church often overlooks streetlight strategies (i.e., prevention programs). We should show love through prevention



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as much as through rescue. In fact, even if you successfully develop and deploy hundreds of teams of rescuers but do nothing to address the cause, you have not done what compassion ultimately calls for—protecting people from harm.

Prevention efforts are usually not as sexy, as they say. But the city councilperson who crafts and champions legislation for funding city streetlights to protect hundreds of people in high-crime areas is engaging in an act of love perhaps greater than the Good Samaritan's. Keeping young girls from being seized for sex trafficking is to be desired over having to rescue them after being broken. **Love that prevents wounds should usually be preferred over love that tends them.** Of course, God sometimes chooses not to prevent pain or hardships in order to reveal His glory through people by developing their godly character or displaying divine power. But generally speaking, divine love agrees with Ben Franklin's classic words of wisdom written when he campaigned for fire safety: "An Ounce of Prevention is worth a Pound of Cure."²

In the previous chapter, I mentioned that around the same time the flooding in Houston in 2017 captured our national attention, hundreds more people died from flooding and landslides in Africa. The enormous effects of the Texas hurricane could not have been prevented. But many of the African floods could have been, because they were due not to a massive hurricane but to poor drainage systems. It was commendable that our public, private, and nonprofit organizations poured relief resources into Texas, but churches especially should be looking across the oceans and tackling the prevention needs in chronically under-resourced areas where deadly disasters could be minimized.

Just as the church answers the call to develop and deploy rescuers, we need to equally emphasize the ministries of prevention. And we need to applaud the people in our congregations who engage in prevention missions as much as those involved in rescue work. People who devote themselves to making other people safer, people who commit themselves to education and job training, people who prayer-walk their communities and initiate reconciliation projects are all doing kingdom work that's like installing streetlights in a dark and dangerous world.

Back to the Starting Point

Do you see how this fresh eyes technique opens the window to a host of thoughts you might never have had without creatively thinking beyond the limits of the actual text? Of course, when engaging in creative interaction with Scripture, you must be careful to remember—or research—what's scriptural and what's not. Never entertain ideas that contradict other biblical texts and truths. However, in this case, there is value in opening the aperture wider to let this parable shed more light on how love should behave.

But finally, that raises a question. If broadening this parable beyond the text's original scope in order to see that prevention and not just rescue is important, why did Jesus limit the parable to one Samaritan rescuing one victim? My guess is He left the story where He did to confront us with an unconditional personal challenge. Ultimately the systemic changes needed to rescue people and prevent evil on a larger scale depend on the existence and responsiveness of individuals who love like the good Samaritan in one-on-one missions of mercy and grace.

My dad had a name for a person like that—a "good egg."

20/20 Focus

1. Compassionate disciples sometimes want to walk "on the other side" of the street to get a break from people's problems. Once we start caring about hurting people, it seems like there's no end. In those times we can feel frustrated, angry, disillusioned, discouraged, or extremely fatigued. Do any of these feelings describe where you are at this point? Which one(s)?
2. Jesus clearly wanted us to notice the thorough steps of compassion the Samaritan took. Think of some type of prevention ministry (e.g., preventing divorce, preventing consumer debt, or preventing teen pregnancy) and list some steps that are necessary if those ministries are to be thorough and effective.
3. Name a couple of problems where you (or your church) are in rescue mode but you wish you were doing more about prevention.
Lord Jesus, I'll admit I can be like the priest and Levite and want to avoid people who need help. I've gotten to the point where I am tired and discouraged. The needs keep coming, but I've run out. I'd love to feel I'm doing more than providing bandages. Could You point me in the direction of some new effort that might promote prevention? I'd love to pour some of my limited energy and resources into that. But still, give me the grace to bandage wounds. Amen.

Vision Check

In scientific experiments you introduce one new variable to discover something you didn't know before. You can guardedly do the same with Scripture. In this chapter, we imagined what the Good Samaritan might need to do had he come across multiple victims over the span of several days. If you try this, remember that the variable is not in the text, so you shouldn't turn your thoughts into a "new doctrine." But you might gain some new insights worth pondering in light of other portions of Scripture.

Try this: read John's version of the feeding of the five thousand, which includes the interesting detail about the five loaves and two fish coming from a boy (John 6:1–15). Try imagining what might have happened if the boy had only three loaves and one fish to bring. Then try another variation of the amount. What thoughts come to mind? Compare your thoughts with mine on dougnewton.com or the Fresh Eyes app.⁹ Newton, D. (2018). [Fresh eyes on Jesus' parables: discovering new insights in familiar passages.](#) Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook.

WHO WAS THE NEIGHBOR?

10:37 The parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37) is one of **Jesus' most popular. It reduces an abstract theological question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life" (10:25), to a simpler, more practical challenge: "Go and do likewise [i.e., show mercy]" (10:37).**

The story begins with the lawyer's self-justifying question, "Who is my neighbor?" But Jesus turned the question around: "Which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" What matters, Jesus implied, is not identifying needs, but meeting them. The question is not Who is my neighbor?, but rather Am I a neighbor to others?

⁹ Newton, D. (2018). [Fresh eyes on Jesus' parables: discovering new insights in familiar passages.](#) Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook.



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What makes the story so poignant, however, is the contrast between the Jewish priest and Levite who avoid the half-dead victim, and the Samaritan who shows him compassion. Jesus was playing on the deep-seated animosity that existed between the two groups (see "Samaria" at John 4:4). He knew His listeners would find it hard enough to show mercy, but unthinkable that a Samaritan would illustrate how. Prejudiced people find it almost impossible to think that their ethnic enemies might be compassionate human beings.

Jesus' challenge to "go and do likewise" is a test for us as we consider the many racial and ethnic divisions in the world today. God is interested in mercy, not maintaining prejudice.

Jesus' own disciples were blinded by ethnic pride. They thought Samaritans ought to be destroyed. See "Condemnation or Compassion?" at Luke 9:51–56.
On another occasion, a Samaritan's faith put Jews to shame. See "Where Are the Others?" at Luke 17:11–19.¹⁰

C. Christ's Parabolic Teaching Ministry. 10:25–13:21

25–29. The parable of the Good Samaritan was told by Jesus in answer to the self-justifying question of a lawyer, **And who is my neighbor?**

30. A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He was probably a Jew. The way down is from approximately 2600 feet above sea level to approximately 800 feet below sea level and is through a treacherous wilderness. Thieves and robbers waited for lonely travelers. This man was attacked, beaten, robbed, and stripped of clothes.

31–37. Two Jews, a priest and a Levite, passed by but did nothing to help the poor man. Then a Samaritan (see Jn 4:9) came along and aided the robbed victim, even seeing to his full recovery by paying for his stay at an inn. This Samaritan was a true neighbor. He had a compassionate heart, a helping hand, and unlimited concern. He gave up personal comfort, physical energy, and valuable time. As one preacher expressed it, the robbers beat him up, the priest and Levite passed him up, but the Samaritan picked him up. The thief said, "What's yours is mine, I'll take it." The priest and Levite reasoned, "What's mine is mine, I'll keep it." But the Samaritan said, "What's mine is yours, we'll share it." Let us heed Jesus' final injunction to the lawyer, **Go, and do thou likewise** (vs. 37).¹¹

¹⁰ [Word in life study Bible](#). (1996). (electronic ed., Lk 10:37). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

¹¹ Hindson, E. E., & Kroll, W. M. (Eds.). (1994). [KJV Bible Commentary](#) (pp. 2037–2038). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.



Parable #10:

Luke 15:1-7(ESV)

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

15 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Matthew 18:10-14 (ESV)

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

¹⁰ “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.^[a] ¹² What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of my^[b] Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

What does this parable mean?

Standard view:

Alternative view:

What does it teach us about the Kingdom of God?

How does this glimpse into what the Kingdom of God is like affect my thinking? My actions? My life?

Notes from Book:

9

What “One” Are We Talking About?

The Lost Sheep

Luke 15:1–7; Matthew 18:10–14

How far can you stretch a parable?

Here’s something you’ll never hear: “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” sung as the bride walks down the aisle. Or “Pomp and Circumstance” at a funeral. Or “Hail to the Chief” at the grand opening of a neighborhood fast-food restaurant. Context is everything in determining what is appropriate.

On our wedding day, just minutes before my bride’s father was to escort her down the aisle—the prelude music was already playing, and I was about to step onto the platform with the officiating pastor—my jokester soon-to-be father-in-law greeted his daughter, wearing crusty farm boots, bib overalls, a flannel shirt, a crumpled cowboy hat, and a huge smile on his face. I had no idea what was going on out in the church lobby, but my wife-to-be was mortified! After a good laugh, her dad quickly changed and the wedding proceeded with the one desired “hitch.” Context is everything. Weddings call for tuxedos and cummerbunds, not yee-haws and bandanas.



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However, most music, dress, and activities are like elastic. They fit many contexts just fine. On that same wedding day, our “very Christian” ceremony featured music from Motown and Mendelssohn. Both were appropriate—just not as the bridal processional. Nevertheless, it’s always important to ask, “Is this appropriate?” or you may wind up coming as a Tootsie Roll to an Overeaters-Anonymous Halloween party.

Many of Jesus’ parables are also elastic. Even though they have a specific context in Scripture, they also can be properly applied in various settings. The parable of the lost sheep provides a case in point. Matthew and Luke recorded very similar versions of this parable, but each chose to refer to it for a different reason. In other words, this parable “stretched” to fit more than one context. I want to demonstrate how that works in this chapter and why it is important to take advantage of its elasticity.

Elastic Threads

Let’s first review how similar the versions are. The story line is essentially the same with only slight but interesting variations. So I have interlaced them. Luke’s version is in roman type and Matthew’s is in italics.

What do you think? Suppose one of you has (*If a man owns*) a hundred sheep and loses one of them (*and one of them wanders away*). Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country (*on the hills*) and go after (*go to look for*) the lost sheep (*the one that wandered off*) until he finds it? And when he finds it (*if he finds it*), he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.” (*truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off*)

You can see the story in both is the same. A person is missing just one of his one hundred sheep, but he leaves the ninety-nine to search for it. He finds the sheep and rejoices. Matthew’s version differs only by explaining how the sheep got lost (“wanders off”) and leaving out the element of community celebration (“calls his friends and neighbors together . . .”) mentioned by Luke.

However, the two versions differ significantly in another important way. Matthew and Luke referred to this parable for different reasons. That’s why I talk about this parable as having elasticity. Matthew introduced the parable after Jesus focused attention on the nature of children and their need for protection. Immediately after the disciples questioned Jesus about the kingdom of heaven’s ranking system—“Who, then, is the greatest?” (Matt. 18:1)—He invited a child to stand with Him as an object lesson for several points He made in response (vv. 2–10):

- “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”
- “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”
- “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”
- “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”

While these comments seem random on the surface, they are tied together by the way they flip upside down the common attitude toward children, who often went unnoticed, unprotected, and unrespected in Jesus’ day.

In contrast, Luke included this parable as part of Jesus’ reaction when the Pharisees muttered about Him sharing meals with tax collectors and “sinners” (Luke 15:1–2). It was the first of three parables (lost sheep, lost coin, lost son), which all illustrate heaven’s joy-filled response when lost people are found and repent (see chapter 3 of this book). Jesus implied His sharing meals with scorned sinners—a very important element of building relationships in this culture—was part of seeking and finding the lost.

Forsaking for Seeking

Here again, looking only at the surface, the contexts for the two versions of the parable are markedly distinct. One refers to honoring and protecting children. The other defends the evangelistic value of associating with common sinners. However, just as a single elastic band can stretch to fit various objects, as Matthew and Luke demonstrated, Jesus’ parable also stretches to fit various circumstances. Nevertheless, we can still identify a shared theme. What is that theme? Go to great lengths to protect or rescue persons who tend to go unnoticed.

But that’s not all. Jesus also valued going to great lengths on behalf of *the lost one* even if it means leaving behind *the sheltered ninety-nine*. But a shepherd is responsible for the whole flock! To leave them alone for the sake of just one lost sheep would have seemed risky. That act of turning away from them would have felt negligent and uncaring. Nevertheless, Jesus’ emphasis on *the lost one* implies this.

On my very first Sunday as the pastor of a renowned college church in my denomination, I entered the pulpit to preach without a suit and tie and continued to do so the remainder of my eleven years there. In many churches around our country this would have been no problem. But in this rather traditional setting, many of the longtime



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members did not appreciate this. I “heard” about it occasionally. Even though I always came clean and pressed, I knew my lack of decorum for a Sunday service disturbed some people. However, this “lost sheep” parable stretched to fit this situation, so their approval and Sabbath equilibrium could not be my concern. Of course, I did not want to cause offense, but they were among the ninety-nine. They were well cared for. Their lives were stable and relatively healthy. My concern was for the scores of people to whom the doors of our church were culturally closed because of its reputation as a highbrow congregation. My preaching in semi-casual dress, along with other gradual adjustments in the “air” of our environment, sent a message that we were a congregation of common people who wanted no one to feel out of place or not good enough to attend.

While this is trivial when compared with horrific injustices on a global scale, it is one example of how Jesus’ elastic parable of the lost sheep can stretch over thousands of situations. In order to focus rescuing attention on one person or group, you will often have to forsake a large group of others who are already within the “fold” of care and privilege. Let me go even further. The lost sheep parable, along with its important elasticity, illustrates as well as any portion of Scripture the nature of our prime directive as Christians. Simply put, our mission is to find the one nobody notices, serves, or offers rescuing hope to.

From Teddy to Tornadoes

Of course, we can think of noticing and rescuing people—seeking *the one*—in terms of spiritual salvation. Where do we go to provide gospel ministry to those who have never heard? That’s how this parable is most often applied, and that application is certainly most important. However, we should never minimize the importance of demonstrating a gospel witness in practical, seemingly non-spiritual ways. Our second-nature impulse should be to feel deeply and serve especially the needs of the unnoticed.

I don’t know how, but somehow through my family’s and church’s influence I picked up that empathetic impulse at a very early age. I remember when I set my teddy bear upright against my pillow as the final act of making my bed each day. I felt sorry for Teddy when I walked out the door to go to school, because he would be there all by himself. I often apologized to him before shutting off the light. As I grew older, my concern for Teddy’s loneliness transferred to guys like David, the challenged kid whom classmates mocked, and Steve, one of only two African American kids in my school of hundreds of second-generation white ethnic students with names like Przestrzelski, Reitano, and Franklin Eberhard Gladstone III. I sensed that being Christian meant passing by the cool kids’ lunch table and sitting beside the lone kid with the dingy white T-shirt.

True Christianity . . . it’s always about leaving the ninety-nine with their advantages and privileges and showing special care for *the one*, the unnoticed, the minority—whoever that one may be, wherever that one may be, and wherever that one may be there. Jesus made that clear. It’s the heart of this parable; it’s the heart of God.

This special care for *the one* is often spiritualized to such a narrow degree that we miss some desperate needs and great opportunities for demonstrating and dispensing God’s life-giving love. Let me give you a great example along with a provocative proposal that seems to run counter to conventional wisdom and common practice among God’s people.

It’s amazing how people of all faiths, political ideologies, ethnicities, and social classes pull together in the aftermath of major natural disasters, like earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornadoes. Local and national media outlets cover the events and their human impact for days and weeks. Professional athletes, Hollywood celebrities, and famous singers launch efforts that raise millions of dollars. Churches and other nonprofit organizations spring into action to send workers and truckloads of donated goods. And of course, government and public relief agencies provide life-saving and rebuilding assistance, usually with mixed reviews but on a massive scale. The stories of lost loved ones and destroyed homes and businesses tear at our hearts.

When Ken Fraley emerged from the bathroom where he had sheltered his wife and two small children in the tub under a mattress, he couldn’t believe his eyes. He had seen pictures on television after other tornadoes, but nothing prepared him for what it would feel like to open the door and see only the concrete pad and part of the chimney of the once two-story brick farmhouse he and his dad had built together twenty years ago. He hung his head. He wasn’t sure how to prepare his family, so he just opened the door a little wider and reached out for his wife’s hand.

The kids weren’t old enough to understand, but his wife, Jenny, felt flattened by a swirl of thoughts that came all at once in no order of importance: “Is the picture of us at Disney World gone? How can I get the girls to dance class tomorrow? Where’s the dog? How are we going to make it with Ken out of work for the past two months? Oh no, my sister’s wedding is next week, and she’s counting on me for the wedding cake!”



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We all know that people caught in these kinds of disasters, as tragic as such situations are, will be the focus of much attention and assistance. Because the governor or president can declare a state of emergency, people like the Fraleys will be eligible for all sorts of relief and resources. New clothes, food, temporary shelter, low-interest loans, and other benefits come from being in the spotlight of national coverage and compassion. But what if I tell you that the Fraleys' loss was an isolated event and not part of a widespread disaster that affected thousands of people? They live way out in the country in western Iowa, and the tornado that destroyed their home touched down for fifteen seconds.

There will be no national media coverage. Sure, they might receive some local attention and gestures of kindness. But they will receive nothing on the scale of help that occurs after a major tornadic storm like the one that flattened Joplin, Missouri, in 2011, and triggered a flood of compassion and care from thousands and thousands of people.

The Shadows of Singularity

My point is this: all around our nation, when a large enough disaster hits and makes the regional or national news, when hundreds or thousands of people fall victim to winds and waves of destruction, when first responders risk their own lives to rush to their rescue, when cameras and correspondents solicit attention that generates massive relief and rebuilding efforts, the needs get noticed. Yet numerous other families endure similar destruction but are never noticed, because they had the ironic misfortune of not suffering as part of some widespread disaster. Theirs was just one relatively small disaster that did not register the tiniest tremor on anyone's Richter scale.

At the very time bright lights of compassion shine on thousands, people all around our homes and towns and cities suffer just as tragic losses but do so in the shadows of singularity:

- A stray bullet from a gang-related skirmish outside her home pierced Maria Escobar's living room window just above where she was coloring a picture of a unicorn and struck her thirty-eight-year-old mother below her left eye, killing her instantly. She, her little brother, and her mom had recently relocated to St. Louis from San Antonio after an unwanted divorce. Kids who lost a parent during a major disaster will be in the eye of compassionate help. But who's going to notice Maria and her brother? Who will give them a home? A hope? A future?
- Janelle Shipley's husband wandered away . . . again. She thought for sure he had been taking his medication but apparently not. She hopped in the car and began driving to all the places she thought he might be. She kept looking at her watch; she was supposed to have been on her way to work fifteen minutes ago. Her boss had warned her, "Another day coming in late and I'm going to have to let you go." But what could she do? Her husband or her job—their only income? She kept driving. If only her husband had gone missing during a major flood while the whole nation was in "rescue mode," her boss might have been more compassionate.

During those times of widespread devastation, when compassion abounds and mobilizes people of all faiths and backgrounds to respond, shouldn't Christians also look for *the one* whose situation will never make the evening news and who will have to face it all alone?

A Provocative Proposal

So here's my application of the lost sheep parable. I think it is in harmony with, if not the actual theme of, Jesus' spirit of compassion. When any disaster strikes that gains attention and compels compassionate action and your heart and likely your church want to join the relief efforts in some meaningful way, do this: match your efforts to respond to the spotlighted needs with some effort to find and rescue a person or family who otherwise will not be noticed and will have no help. If you're going to raise relief funds, fill a couple of trailers with emergency supplies and deploy your church van with a team of volunteers to go to the affected city, don't stop there. Match that effort by looking for some unnoticed family in western Iowa—or wherever—that was crushed by some isolated tragedy.

Not long before I began to write this chapter, hurricanes slammed the city of Houston, Texas, and then the entire state of Florida and created historic floods and destruction. The national news media focused on these areas for days—and rightly so. But did you know that during the very same season, devastating floods and landslides hit numerous places in Africa, killing hundreds more people, destroying countless more homes, devastating thousands more families? Probably not. We were focused on Houston and Florida. But what about the unnoticed others? Who will rescue them? Because of our wealthy culture's advantages, the existence and responsiveness of public and private relief agencies, and a strong national government, victims in our nation are like the ninety-nine within the fold of compassionate assistance. What about those who are not?

As a pastor, I have officiated many funerals. Sometimes the bereaved family will notify the public: "In lieu of sending flowers, please make a donation to your favorite charity in memory of our dearly loved husband, father, and



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grandfather.” Their intent is for money to go where it is needed most, toward humanitarian needs rather than flowers.

During major disasters that marshal generous donations and volunteer hours, what if our churches went so far as to say, “In lieu of (or in addition to) sending relief to those major disaster areas, we will honor those wonderful efforts by sending relief to where no help at all is going right now—to places of isolated disaster and people no one is noticing.”

I suppose the question still remains: Is Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep elastic enough to fit the application I am making? If so, is your compassion elastic enough to wrap around *the one* I am talking about?

20/20 Focus

1. Matthew’s and Luke’s completely different uses of the same parable support the idea that certain portions of Scripture can be properly understood as elastic (i.e., they can be applied in different ways). But what cautions would you offer to make sure we never stretch Scripture too far?
2. There was at least one time when the apostle Peter stretched Scripture to make a point. In Acts 4:11, he changed one three-letter word as he quoted Psalm 118:22. Look up both verses in the NIV to spot that key word. How and why did he stretch that verse to fit the situation he was in?
3. This chapter focuses on the “shadows of singularity.” Try to put into your own words what that means.
4. List three or four problems in the media’s limelight currently that are receiving lots of attention and triggering lots of social action and human kindness. Then counterbalance that attention by identifying someone suffering (or some kind of problem) no one is noticing.

Lord Jesus, I am grateful for how the regional and national media can rally people to humanitarian causes, especially in times of widespread crisis. But I want my compassion and my church to be controlled and directed by Your Spirit, not the secular media. Give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and the will to act on behalf of those whose situations and suffering have not attracted attention. Amen.

Vision Check

God’s Word is not rigid. It’s alive. That means it can move and stretch. Its truth is fixed, but its application varies. It’s elastic enough to cover more than the immediate scriptural context. It’s good to imagine other situations to which its truth might apply.

For example, think about the parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1–13). Readers often assume that the immediate application of this parable is to Jesus’ return. While that does seem to be the case, think about the main points Jesus was making about these virgins. Imagine how you could apply these principles to circumstances and occasions other than the second coming. Bring your ideas to dougnewton.com or the Fresh Eyes app to compare them with mine.

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15:1 The Pharisees’ criticism of Jesus’ open association with known **sinners** and social outcasts occasioned three parables, which illustrate God’s love and concern for sinners. His attitude is sharply opposed to that of the self-righteous. **The Pharisees** correspond to the 99 sheep, the 9 coins, and the elder brother. **The tax collectors and sinners** correspond to the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son.

15:4 The **or** of v. 8 indicates that the two parables illustrate the same point. God is concerned with one lost person and rejoices in his recovery. Those who are legalistically self-righteous are not even aware of their need.

15:5 Sheep that are lost lie down helplessly and refuse to budge.

15:7 Jesus’ table-fellowship with sinners (v. 2) is a celebration of joy, analogous to the joy a shepherd must share with his friends and neighbors on finding a lost sheep (v. 6).¹²

15:1–2. Publicans and sinners. Three stories with a common theme are recounted by Christ in this chapter to illustrate His love and concern for sinful men and women. **The Pharisees and scribes murmured** because Jesus showed such love and kindness to sinners.

3. And he spake this parable unto them. Both sinners and Pharisees alike were to hear and apply this parable. The word *parable* occurs only once in this chapter, perhaps pointing to one parable with three connected parts. In each story something is lost: (1) a sheep; (2) a shekel; and (3) a son. In each case, the lost object is found and produces rejoicing. The sheep is innocently lost, the coin carelessly lost, but the son willfully lost. The percentage of loss grows in each case from one out of a hundred, to one out of ten, to one out of two.

4. The sheep is an exceedingly dumb animal, seemingly not having much sense. As such, it is sometimes used to picture the lost spiritual condition of people (Isa 53:6; Jer 50:6; Mt 9:36; 1 Pet 2:25). This parable tells of a shepherd going out in search of one lost sheep while he leaves ninety-nine safely in the fold. It is almost a universal human characteristic to go after that which one loses. Jesus sees the plight of lost sinners and goes to seek and to save (Lk 19:10), while the Pharisees care little about lost sinners.

¹² Hayford, J. W. (Ed.). (1997). *Spirit filled life study Bible* (electronic ed., Lk 15:1–7). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.



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5. Layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. The poor sheep was probably exhausted from wandering, exposure, and hunger. The shepherd did not mind the extra burden or journey because he rejoiced.

6–7. The friends and neighbors were summoned because of the shepherd's great joy and because they may have aided in the search. Jesus' remark that there is also joy in heaven over a sinner that repents perhaps sadly implies that not many rejoiced with Christ here on earth regarding these matters.¹³

¹³ Hindson, E. E., & Kroll, W. M. (Eds.). (1994). [KJV Bible Commentary](#) (pp. 2048–2049). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.