The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology

Volume 13 · Number 3 Fall 2009

Editorial Office & Subscription Services:
SBTS Box 832
2825 Lexington Rd.
Louisville, KY 40280
(800) 626-5525, x 4413

Editorial E-Mail:
journaloffice@sbts.edu

Parables in the Gospel of Matthew

Yearly subscription costs for four issues: $25, individual inside the U. S.; $50, individual outside the U. S.; $40, institutional inside the U. S.; $65, institutional outside the U. S. Opinions expressed in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* are solely the responsibility of the authors and are not necessarily those of the editors, members of the Advisory Board, or the *SBJT* Forum.

This periodical is indexed in Religion Index One: Periodicals, the Index to Book Reviews in Religions, Religion Indexes: Ten Year Subset on CD-ROM, and the ATLA Religion Database on CD-ROM, published by the American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Dr., 16th Flr., Chicago, IL 60606, atla@atla.com, www.atla.com.

The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology is published quarterly by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2825 Lexington Road, Louisville, KY 40280. Fall 2009. Vol. 13, No. 3. ISSN 1520-7307. Second Class postage paid at Louisville, KY. Postmaster: Send address changes to: SBTS, Box 832, 2825 Lexington Road, Louisville, KY 40280.

Editorial: Preaching and Teaching the Parables of Jesus

Stephen J. Wellum

Kent Hughes begins his book on Mark's Gospel recounting what happened to E. V. Rieu, one of the world's famous scholars of the classics, a number of years ago. After having completed a translation of Homer into modern English for the Penguin Classics series, he was then asked by the publisher to translate the Gospels. At this time in his life, Rieu was sixty years old and a self-avowed agnostic all his life. Hughes recounts that when Rieu's son heard what his father was about to do, he said, "It will be interesting to see what Father will make of the four Gospels. It will be even more interesting to see what the four Gospels make of Father." By God's grace, within a year's time, Rieu responded to the Gospels he was translating by committing his life to the Lord Jesus. As Hughes rightly notes, Rieu's story is a marvelous testimony to the transforming power of God's Word. As the author of Hebrews rightly reminds us, "the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (4:12, ESV).

Stephen J. Wellum is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Dr. Wellum received his Ph.D. degree in theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and has also taught theology at the Associated Canadian Theological Schools and Northwest Baptist Theological College and Seminary in Canada. He has contributed to several publications and a collection of essays on theology and worldview issues.

In fact, it is precisely because Scripture is what it is, namely God's Word written, and that it is by his Word that our Triune God discloses himself to us, convicts us of our sin, and conforms us to the image of the Son, that every year *SBJT* devotes one issue to the specific book or portion of Scripture which corresponds to Lifeway's January Bible Study. We do so not merely to increase our knowledge of the Scripture—as important as that is—but also more significantly to bring our thought and lives under the microscope of God's Word so that we learn anew to be those who not only hear the Word but are doers of it—who do not seek to stand over God's Word but under it—and to allow the Scripture to do something to us instead of the other way around. Learning more about God's Word must always lead us to a greater knowledge of God in the face of Christ, which in turn must lead us to a greater enjoyment of God in trust, love, devotion, and obedience. Apart from these results, our study of the Scripture is not doing for us what God intends for it to do.

SBJT 13.3 (2009): 2-3.

This year we have the privilege of thinking more deeply about the parables of our Lord within the overall presentation of Matthew's Gospel. Even though the parables of Jesus are probably one of the best known literary forms in Scripture and that about a third of Jesus' teaching in the Synoptic Gospels comes in parabolic form, throughout the history of the church there has been much debate over how best to interpret and apply Jesus' parables. There are a variety of reasons for this debate. For example, defining exactly what a parable is has not been easy since the word "parable" (Heb: *mashal*; Gk: *parabolē*) can refer to such things as a proverb (1 Sam 24:13; Luke 4:23), satire (Ps 44:11; Isa 14:3-4), riddle (Ps 49:4; Prov 1:6); figurative saying (Mark 7:14-17; Luke 5:36-38); extended simile (Matt 13:33; Mark 4:30-32); and story parable (Matt 25:1-13; Luke 14:16-24). Hence, disagreement over the kind of genre to which a parable belongs has led to disagreement over how best to interpret and apply the parables throughout the ages. In addition, there has been a huge debate over whether parables should be interpreted allegorically or literally, or whether parables have one point or multiple points. Once again, dispute over such matters has led to the parables being interpreted in diverse ways.

Furthermore, even when we ask the basic question, "What was Jesus' purpose in using parables to teach the people?"—a question his own disciples asked him (see Matt 13:10)—his response is quite different than a lot of people think. Many people teach that Jesus uses parables to simplify his teaching and to communicate basic truths in a folksy kind of way. However, even though there may be truth in this, Jesus is clear that he uses parables both to teach and reveal truth to believers and to hide truths from those who stand outside the kingdom. That is why it is a bit reductionistic either to say that Jesus taught in parables merely so that everyone would more easily grasp the truth, or solely to condemn unbelievers. If Jesus wanted to hide the truth from unbelievers he would not have spoken to them at all! Rather, parables are used to accomplish what God's Word does every time it is preached and taught: to give light and life to those who receive Christ and to harden and judge those who reject him. In this way, the parables spoken to the crowds do not simply convey information, nor mask it, but they challenge the hearers (and us!) with the claims of Christ himself as he comes as the Lord, inaugurating his Kingdom, and calling all people to follow him in repentance, faith, and obedience.

Given the importance of Jesus' parables and how, at their very heart, their purpose is confront us with the glory of Christ as the Lord and King, it is worthwhile to spend some time reflecting on how best to interpret and apply the parables. In fact, that is what all the articles in this issue are attempting to do. It is my prayer that this issue will not only lead to that end, but it will also confront us with our glorious Redeemer, the subject of these parables, and that they will do to us what they are intended to do—to cause us to know and follow Christ who is life eternal.

Parables in the Gospels: History of Interpretation and Hermeneutical Guidelines[1]

Robert L. Plummer

About one-third of Jesus' teaching is in parables. So influential are these parables that even people who have never read the Bible use expressions drawn from them (e.g., "the good Samaritan" or "the prodigal Son"). Though widely known, Jesus' parables are also notorious for their frequent misinterpretation. In this article, I will begin by defining "parable" and giving a brief historical survey of how the parables have been interpreted. Then, in the second half of the article, I will offer some guidelines for properly interpreting parables.

Robert L. Plummer is Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

He has served in missionary assignments of varying length in China, Israel, Trinidad, Ghana, Malaysia, and Turkey. Dr. Plummer's articles have appeared in *Westminster Theological Journal*, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, *New Holman Bible Dictionary*, *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, and other publications. He is the author of *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?* (Paternoster Press, 2006) and *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible* (Kregel, forthcoming) from which this article is taken.

DEFINING "PARABLE"

When asked the definition of a parable, most Christians might respond, "An earthly story with a heavenly meaning." The dictionary definition is "a short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle."[2] While these definitions are correct, the most fundamental component of a parable is that there must be a comparison.[3] For example, in the parable of the hidden treasure the kingdom of heaven is compared to a treasure ("The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field," Matt 13:44). The Greek word *parabolē* which underlies our English word "parable" has a broad range of meaning. It can refer to proverbs, similes, figurative sayings, stories, etc. For our purposes, however, we will limit our discussion primarily to the story parables that are found in the Bible.

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

At this point, we will briefly survey the way parables have been interpreted throughout church history. This summary will be helpful in two regards: (1) In seeing the interpretive missteps commonly taken throughout history, the reader will be forewarned not to repeat them; and (2) it can be instructive to see how scholarly insights

resulted in significant shifts in the understanding of parables. The interpretation of parables is surveyed in five historical periods below.

Jesus' Original Setting and the Writing of the Gospels

At the least, we can say that Jesus and the inspired Gospel authors properly understood his parables. Thus, when Jesus gives an explanation of his own parables (Matt 13:36–43; Mark 4:13–20), or the Gospel authors give contextual clues as to the meaning of the parables (e.g., Luke 10:29; 15:1–2), those interpretations are definitive. It is important to note that while Jesus used parables to illustrate truth (Mark 12:12; Luke 10:36–37), he also used parables to conceal truth and increase the culpability of his hard-hearted opponents (Mark 4:10–12, 33–34; cf. 2 Thess 2:11–12).[4]

The Early Church to the Reformation

Very soon after the completion of the New Testament, early Christians began interpreting the text allegorically. That is, they proposed many allegorical meanings unintended by the biblical authors. For example, every early post-New Testament interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) explains the story as an allegorical message of salvation, with the Good Samaritan signifying Jesus. In the text, however, Jesus clearly tells the story to answer a Jewish legal expert's question, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). A typical example of such allegorical interpretation is below.

THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN, AS INTERPRETED BY ORIGEN (AD 185–254)[5]

Parable Details	Allegorical Explanations
Man going down to Jericho	Adam
Jerusalem	Paradise
Jericho	The world
Robbers	Hostile powers (John 10:8)
Priest	The Law
Levite	The Prophets
Samaritan	Christ
Wounds	Disobedience, vices, and sin
Beast (Donkey)	The Lord's body, which bears our sins
Stable (Inn)	The Church
Two Denarii	Knowledge of the Father and the Son
Manager of the Stable (Innkeeper)	Head of the Church "to whom its care has been entrusted" (guardian angel)
Promised Return of	Savior's Second Coming the Samaritan

Early Christians interpreted parables in this way for several reasons: (1) Jesus himself explains at least a few details of his parables allegorically (Mark 4:13–20; Matt 13:36–43). If Jesus can do this, why not his followers? (2) Allegory was a common approach to interpreting religious texts in the Greco-Roman world. Some early Christians uncritically adopted some of the interpretive methods of their day. (3) Allegorical interpretation emphasizes the interpreter's access to the "secret" meaning of the parables. Such a method is inevitably attractive to humans who have a propensity towards the secretive and conspiratorial.

The Reformation

The Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century decried the allegorical excesses of their forbearers. Martin Luther (1483–1546) said that Origen's allegorical interpretations were "silly," "amazing twaddle," "absurd," and "altogether useless."[6] While isolated voices throughout pre-Reformation church history had criticized illegitimate allegory, the Reformation was the first time that such focused criticism descended systematically even to the parables. Unfortunately, out of habit, carelessness or for other reasons, many Reformers continued to provide allegorical reflections on the

parables. John Calvin (1509–1564), the prince of Reformation biblical expositors, was most consistent in keeping to the authorial intent of the parables. In reference to allegorical interpretation, specifically as represented in the allegorization of the parable of the good Samaritan, Calvin wrote,

> I acknowledge that I have no liking for any of these interpretations; but we ought to have a deeper reverence for Scripture than to reckon ourselves at liberty to disguise its natural meaning. And, indeed, any one may see that the curiosity of certain men has led them to contrive these speculations, contrary to the intention of Christ.[7]

The Reformation to the Late Nineteenth Century

The Reformation broke the allegorical stranglehold on much of the Bible, but a majority of Christian writers continued to allegorize the parables. The many unexplained and striking details in Jesus' stories were irresistible fodder to these interpreters who, due to historical influences, were predisposed to see allegorical significance that the biblical authors did not intend.

The Late Nineteenth to the Early Twenty-First Century

Several important developments in the interpretation of parables have occurred in the last century and a half. In 1888, the German New Testament scholar Adolf Jülicher published the first of his two-volume work, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (*The Parable-talks of Jesus*).[8] Jülicher's study sounded the death knell for allegorical interpretation of the parables.[9] Instead of allegorizing the details of a parable, he focused on the main point of why Jesus gave the parable. Unfortunately, Jülicher interpreted parables according to his skeptical and liberal theological predilections and mislabeled many legitimate teachings of Jesus as later historical accretions.[10]

In the early to mid-twentieth century, scholars such a C. H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias called for interpreters to hear parables as they were heard by Jesus' original first-century Jewish Palestinian audience.[11] Jesus announced an in-breaking of God's kingdom mediated through his messianic reign. Any interpretation of the parables which fails to consider this original historical context is doomed to failure.

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, scholars known as "Redaction critics" drew attention to the final editorial contributions of the Gospel authors. For parables, this emphasis was important because Gospel authors gave their readers editorial clues to the proper interpretation of Jesus' parables. Through grouping similar parables, providing important contextual information, or employing other literary devices, the authors of the Gospels provided guidance to the correct understanding of Jesus' parables.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, there has been somewhat of a regress towards early allegorical tendencies. On one front, some reader-response and "aesthetic" critics insist on reading the parables apart from the original historical context.[12] The parables are taken as having a dynamic meaning-producing polyvalent life of their own. While this description may sound somewhat appealing in the abstract, in real life it means parables can mean whatever the reader wants them to mean. Clearly, however, Jesus used parables to convey specific, definable truths. Admittedly, the affective power of story cannot be reproduced in propositional summary, but the basic meaning of Jesus' parables can and should be so summarized.

On other fronts, there has been an increasing *uncritical* interest in the history of the church's interpretation of biblical texts.[13] In other words, various interpretations of biblical passages are valued in their own right and given a level of authority and influence which sometimes equals or exceeds the inspired text. While a study of "reception history" (the way a text has been received throughout history) can be quite informative, the text itself must maintain a clear primacy over aberrant interpretations.

HERMENEUTICAL GUIDELINES

If parables have been so infamously misinterpreted throughout church history, what are some hermeneutical guidelines that will aid us in staying on the proper course? As a start, it is important to note that Jesus often employed parables to teach about the kingdom of God. Klyne Snodgrass claims that the meaning of almost all parables can be subsumed under the theme of kingdom, which was the main subject of Jesus' preaching (Mark 1:15). In fact, many parables begin with an explicit introductory phrase such as, "This is what the kingdom of God is like" (Mark 4:26). Snodgrass writes,

> The primary focus of the parables is the coming of the kingdom of God and the resulting discipleship that is required. When Jesus proclaimed the kingdom he meant that God was exercising his power and rule to bring forgiveness, defeat evil and establish righteousness in fulfillment of Old Testament promises.[14]

This kingdom theme, in turn, is often expressed through three main theological sub-motifs: "the graciousness of God, the demands of discipleship, and the dangers of disobedience."[15]

Below are several suggestions for determining the author's intended meaning of a parable.[16]

Determine the Main Point(s) of the Parable

The most important principle in interpreting the parables is to determine the reason the parable was uttered and why it was included into the canon of Scripture. There is some debate among evangelicals as to whether each parable teaches only one main point (e.g., Robert Stein) or whether a parable may have several main points (e.g., Craig Blomberg). In reality, these two perspectives are not as varied as they may initially appear.

For example, Craig Blomberg insists that parables can have one, two, or three main points, *determined by the number of main characters/items in the parable*.[17] Thus, for example, in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), there are three main characters—the father, the older brother, and the younger brother. The three main points, based on the activity of the three representative characters, would be

> (1) *The father:* God the Father is gracious and forgiving.
> (2) *The older brother:* Followers of God should beware a begrudging attitude towards his grace and forgiveness exercised towards others.
> (3) *The younger brother:* God welcomes rebels who confess their sin, turn from it, and embrace his mercy.[18]

On the other hand, Stein maintains that it is more helpful to express the main point in one sentence. He might explain the meaning of the parable as follows: God (represented by the father) is gracious to sinners (the younger brother) and, therefore, we should not despise his love to others (as did the older brother). The focus of the parable, according to Stein, is on the response of the older brother and his unwillingness to rejoice in his brother's return and his father's complete acceptance. This analysis is confirmed by the context as Luke clearly indicates that Jesus is responding to the Pharisees for their begrudging attitude towards God's mercy (Luke 15:1–2).

But just how do we determine the main point(s) of a parable? Stein recommends these additional questions: [19]

> (1) *Who are the main characters?* As we have already seen with the parable of the prodigal son, the main characters are the father, the younger brother, and the older brother. Stein suggests that of the three, the father and the other brother should be given the most attention.
> (2) *What occurs at the end?* As Jesus often stresses his most important point at the end of a parable, the fact that the parable of the prodigal son ends with a rebuke of the older brother (Luke 15:31–32) further supports that Jesus is focusing

on correcting a wicked attitude towards God's gracious treatment of sinners.

(3) *What occurs in direct discourse?* (in quotation marks) Direct quotations draw the readers' or listeners' attention to the parable's emphasized point. For example, in the parable of the prodigal son, note the emphatic placement of the older brother's quoted words towards the end of the parable (Luke 15:29–30).

(4) *Who/What gets the most space?* (That is, who or what has the most verses devoted to them?) Simply by giving the most literary space to a certain person or item in the parable, Jesus showed us where his emphasis lay.

Recognize Stock Imagery in the Parables

In my classroom lecture on parables, I sometimes ask for an international student as a volunteer. Addressing the student, I say, "Imagine you pick up a newspaper and find a cartoon with a donkey and elephant talking to each other. What is the cartoon about?" The suggestions are inevitably amusing—and completely wrong. The Americans in the class, on the other hand, immediately recognize the donkey as a symbol of the Democratic political party and the elephant as a symbol of Republicans. We do so because we are accustomed to such stock imagery from our cultural conditioning.

Jesus' first-century audience and the early readers of the Gospels were also accustomed to certain stock imagery. From the Old Testament and other early Jewish sources, we can note these common symbols:

Stock Image	Significance	Example
Father	God	Luke 15:11–32
Master	God	Mark 12:1–11
Judge	God	Luke 18:1–8
Shepherd	God	Matt 18:12–14
King	God	Matt 18:23–35
Son	Israel, a follower of God	Luke 15:11–32
Vineyard	Israel	Matt 21:33–41
Vine	Israel or God's People	John 15:5
Fig Tree	Israel	Mark 11:13
Sheep	God's people	Matt 25:31–46
Servant	Follower of God	Matt 25:14–30
Enemy	The devil	Matt 13:24–30
Harvest	Judgment	Matt 13:24–30
Wedding Feast	Messianic banquet, the coming age	Matt 25:1–13

Symbolic stock images appear as main characters or central actions within parables. Sometimes a non-stock image plays a central role, and careful study must determine its significance. Additional details in the story are generally intended simply to make the story interesting and memorable.

Note Striking or Unexpected Details

My wife and I once gave an Arabic "Jesus video" (Gospel of Luke video) to some new Sudanese immigrants. As we sat in their cramped living room, watching the video with them, I was struck by how the immigrants were captivated by Jesus' teaching and how at certain points they laughed or glanced at each other with amusement. For them, and rightly so, Jesus was an amazing, interesting, and even humorous teacher. Sadly, our minds have been dulled by familiarity. Jesus' parables are filled with striking details, unexpected twists, shocking statements, and surprise outcomes. When such attention-getting components occur, we need to pay attention because an important point is being made. For example, in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23–35), we should note the nearly unfathomable difference between the debt that the servant owed the king ("ten thousand talents" [NIV] or "millions of dollars" [NLT]) and the debt owed to him by another servant ("a hundred denarii" [NIV] or "a few thousand dollars" [NLT]). Here Jesus emphasizes the immense grace of God in forgiving the depth of our sin, while

also putting in proper perspective the sins we are asked to forgive others. Another example of an attention-getting detail is found in the parable of the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1–8). The brash persistence of the widow would have been scandalous—especially in the traditional society of Jesus' day. With this vivid picture of determination, Jesus calls his followers to persistence in prayer. Similarly, an older man running to anything, much less a reunion with a renegade son (Luke 15:20), would have been an undignified sight in first-century Israel. How much more surprising, then, is the eager graciousness of God the Father towards repentant sinners.

Do Not Press All Details for Meaning

Not all details in a parable have significance. Rather, many details simply make the story interesting, memorable, or true-to-life for the hearers. For example, in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23–35), the amount of money ("ten thousand talents") and the unit of money ("talents") have no special significance—other than to denote a large debt in a known currency. Likewise, in the parable of the prodigal son, when the father greets his repentant son with new clothes, new shoes, a ring, and a banquet (Luke 15:22–23), these gifts signify acceptance and celebration. They do not each carry some symbolic meaning that must be de-coded. In fact, to attempt such de-coding is to head down the misguided path of allegorical interpretation.[20]

Since each *central* parable figure generally conveys only *one main point of comparison*, it should not surprise us that some characters act in untoward ways. The judge in the parable of Luke 18:1–8, in some sense, represents God, to whom we bring our requests. Yet, while the human judge is only pestered into justice (Luke 18:4–5), God is eager to intervene for his people (Luke 18:7). The main point of comparison in the parable is the need for persistence in prayer (Luke 18:1). In the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matt. 25:1–13), the wise maidens are commended for preparing appropriately by bringing enough oil for their lamps (Matt 25:4). Though the bridegroom delayed his coming, the wise virgins were still ready for his arrival. In the same way, Jesus' followers are called always to be ready (by living in faithful obedience), though his coming may be delayed (Matt 25:13). The fact that five virgins were wise and five were foolish does not mean that fifty percent of the world will be saved and fifty percent damned. Neither is Jesus teaching us that we should not share (the wise virgins refused to share their oil, Matt 25:9). Jesus was a master storyteller and he included many details simply to make his stories interesting.

A friend once told me about the sermon his pastor preached on Matt 13:44–46 (the parables of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price). His pastor asserted that the treasure and the pearl stood for the Christian believer or the church and that Jesus was the one buying the treasure or the pearl. The pastor claimed that this interpretation must be true because we do not "buy" the kingdom. Jesus, rather, buys us with his blood. This interpretation sounds very pious, but is based on a misunderstanding of parabolic language. In both parables, Jesus sets before his hearers a crisis, where everything else is less important than the treasure or pearl. Jesus' preaching calls us to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matt 6:33). Yes, ultimately, we can only seek the kingdom because of the grace given us (Eph 2:8–10). In these parables, however, Jesus is calling people to respond by valuing him and his messianic kingdom above anything else. Divine sovereignty does not negate human responsibility.

Pay Attention to the Literary and Historical Context of the Parable

The authors of the Gospels often clue us to the meaning of a parable by including information about why Jesus uttered that parable or by grouping together parables on similar topics. An obvious example occurs at the beginning of the parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge (Luke

18:1–8). In the opening lines of the account, Luke notes, "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1). Any interpretation which neglects this authoritative word of guidance is sure to go astray.

Luke provides similarly helpful contextual information prior to Jesus' series of three parables in Luke 15 (culminating in the parable of the prodigal son), Luke tells us, "Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' Then Jesus told them this parable" (Luke 15:1–3). Luke did not have to tell us this information, but this introduction helps us see that these parables are given as a response to religious hypocrisy which fails to understand the graciousness of God toward sinners (cf. Luke 15:31–32). Also, both before and after the parable of the good Samaritan, Luke clearly shows that this parable is Jesus' response to a self-righteous inquirer who wants to illegitimately limit the term "neighbor" (Luke 10:25–29, 36–37; cf. Luke 14:7; 19:11).

Whether Jesus originally pronounced the four parables of Matt 24:45–25:46 (The Faithful and Unfaithful Slave, the Ten Bridesmaids, the Talents, and the Sheep and the Goats) together without intervening comment, we do not know. But, it is no mistake that we find them together and that they follow immediately on the heels of his eschatological discourse of Matt 24:1–44. The parables all call Jesus' disciples to faithful obedience as they wait for his return.

Sometimes a knowledge of history or cultural backgrounds aids in the interpretation of a parable. For example, to understand more fully the parable of the good Samaritan, the reader should know that the Jews of Jesus' day discriminated against Samaritans. By making the Samaritan the only "neighborly" person in the story (Luke 10:33, 36), Jesus condemned his hypocritical contemporaries who delimited love to exclude certain races or persons.[21] While such background information is often available from a careful reading of the entire Bible itself (e.g., John 4:9; 8:48), persons with less familiarity with the Bible may want to consult a study Bible. Also, highly recommended is Craig Blomberg's *Interpreting the Parables*, which gives a brief, insightful discussion of every parable in the Gospels.

SUMMARY

In this article, we began by surveying the history of interpretation of Jesus' story parables. We divided the survey into five historical periods: (1) Jesus' original setting and the writing of the Gospels; (2) the early church to the Reformation; (3) the Reformation; (4) the Reformation to the late nineteenth century; and (5) the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. This brief overview will hopefully help the reader avoid interpretive missteps of the past, as well as give a historical example of the influence of Christian scholarship on interpretive trends.

In the latter half of the article, we overviewed a number of guidelines for the interpretation of parables: (1) Determine the main point(s) of the parable. In order to determine the main point, it is helpful to ask the following questions: (a) Who are the main characters? (b) What occurs at the end? (c) What occurs in direct discourse? (d) Who/What gets the most space? (2) Recognize stock imagery in the parables. (3) Note striking and unexpected details. (4) Do not press all details for meaning. (5) Pay attention to the literary and historical context of the parable.

ENDNOTES

[1]This article is excerpted from the forthcoming *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible* by Robert L. Plummer, ©2010. Published by Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI. Used by permission.

[2]*Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed.

[3]Robert H. Stein defines a parable as "a figure of speech in which there is a brief or extended comparison" (*An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981], 22). My understanding of the

history of interpretation of parables has been greatly influenced by Stein.

[4]Stein remarks, "The fact that for centuries the meaning of the parables has been lost through allegorical interpretation and ignorance of the *Sitz im Leben* of Jesus also indicates that the parables are not self-evident illustrations" (Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings* [rev. ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994], 40).

[5]Origen, *Homiliae in Lucam* 34.3–9. Interestingly, Origen draws upon an unnamed predecessor for this interpretation. He begins, "One of the elders wanted to interpret the parable as follows" (*Homiliae in Lucam* 34.3). For an English translation of Origen's extant sermons on Luke, see *Origen: Homilies on Luke, Fragments on Luke* (trans. Joseph T. Lienhard; The Fathers of the Church 94; Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1996).

[6]Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1–5,* in *Works* (55 vols.; ed. J. Pelikan; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), 1:91, 98, 233.

[7]John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (trans. William Pringle; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 63.

[8]Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (Freiburg: Mohr, 1888). This work has never been translated into English.

[9]The death knell in scholarly circles, at least (K. R. Snodgrass, "Parables," in *Dictionary of jesus and the Gospels* [ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992], 591). Allegorical interpretation in more popular literature has continued to the present day.

[10]Ibid., 591.

[11]C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1935); Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (rev. ed.; trans. S. H. Hooke; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963).

[12]E.g., D. O. Via, *The Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).

[13]See, for example, Daniel J. Treier's description of the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS) movement (*Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], 39–55).

[14]Snodgrass, "Parables," 599.

[15]Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 326.

[16]While the Gospel authors (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are technically the authors of the parables (in that they wrote them down), we assume that they, as inspired authors, faithfully conveyed Jesus' meaning.

[17]Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 166.

[18]Blomberg summarizes the main points accordingly: "(1) Even as the prodigal always had the option of repenting and returning home, so also all sinners, however wicked, may confess their sins and turn to God in contrition. (2) Even as the father went to elaborate lengths to offer reconciliation to the prodigal, so also God offers all people, however undeserving, lavish forgiveness of sins if they are willing to accept it. (3) Even as the older brother should not have begrudged his brother's reinstatement but rather rejoiced in it, so those who claim to be God's people should be glad and not mad that he extends his grace even to the most undeserving"(ibid., 174).

[19]Questions adapted from Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 146–49.

[20]Tertullian (*c.* 160–225), in fact, did just this. He interpreted the following parable images accordingly: good Samaritan = neighbor = Christ; thieves = rulers of darkness; wounds = fears, lusts, wraths, pains, deceits, pleasures; wine = blood of David's vine; oil = compassion of the Father; binding = love, faith, hope (quoted from Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, 44).

[21]Thus, it is fitting that in his modern paraphrase of the Gospels set in the Southeastern United States of the 1950s, Clarence Jordan replaces the Samaritan with an African-American. The priest and Levite are represented by "a white preacher" and "a white Gospel song leader" (*The Cotton Patch Version of Luke and Acts* [New York: Association Press, 1969], 46–47).

Matthew 13 and the Function of the Parables in the First Gospel

Jonathan T. Pennington

INTRODUCTION

From the days of their original delivery down to our own time, the parables of Jesus have served to stimulate, intrigue, invite, repel, inspire, and invigorate those who have encountered them. Countless books, articles, and sermons have wrestled with what the parables are, how they are to be interpreted, and what they mean. The current edition of this journal is yet another paving stone in this long and winding road.

Jonathan T. Pennington is Assistant Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

He received is Ph.D. from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. In addition to authoring numerous articles and works on both Hebrew and Greek vocabulary, Dr. Pennington has edited (along with Sean M. McDonough) *Cosmology and New Testament Theology* (Continuum, 2008) and is the author of *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Baker, 2009).

To review or rehearse even the contours of this road requires lengthy discussion, and thankfully, many good overviews do exist. One such recent work is Klyne Snodgrass's *Stories with Intent*.[1] Snodgrass provides a thoughtful and well-researched discussion of the many matters relevant to our understanding of the parables. These include the nature of parables in terms of metaphor and allegory, the classification of different types of parables, the history of the interpretation of the parables, and the methodology for interpreting them.

For this essay my focus will be much narrower. Apart from one macro-level issue, discussed below, I will explore only the specific question of the coherence and function of the collection of parables in Matthew 13.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION—THE PARABLES IN JESUS' MINISTRY AND ISRAEL'S STORY

Before turning particularly to Matthew 13, it will be beneficial to consider how Jesus' parables fit into his ministry and teaching overall. It is well known that Jesus gave much of his teaching in the form of parables, but less often discussed is how the content of these parables relates to the larger story and theology of the Scriptures, particularly the Old Testament and the story of Israel. One scholar who has reflected carefully on this question is N. T. Wright. In his book, *Jesus and the Victory of God*,[2] Wright is seeking to answer the simple but vast question of who Jesus was. His answer at least in part is: Jesus is the true King, Messiah, and Prophet of God who taught and

SBJT 13.3 (2009): 12-20.

brought about the final return from exile for God's people. Wright goes on to observe that Jesus' parables and the way he told them form a crucial part of this Messianic and Prophetic role.

Wright makes several important observations about Jesus' parables. They followed well-known Jewish lines, with several taken directly from Old Testament models, such as the vine or vineyard as Israel, and the sheep and shepherd as Israel and her king. At the same time, several of Jesus' parables are quite close to apocalyptic discourse, with a strange story interpreted so that its secret symbols may be understood by those with ears to hear.[3] One can think immediately of Daniel and other Old Testament prophets whose metaphorical visions needed and were given a prophetic interpretation.

The connection with the prophets on both of these points is very important. Stories were the means through which the Old Testament prophets usually communicated, and often with allegorical apocalyptic stories.[4] So Jesus' choice to teach in parables is not entirely new, but is continuing this weighty tradition of telling the story of Israel and showing how it will arrive at its paradoxical conclusion. Indeed, beyond being just in the prophetic tradition, the closest parallel to Jesus' parables turns out to be the world of Jewish apocalyptic and subversive literature, in which seers receive visions of the mysteries which are explained via their correspondences with the real world.[5] When one considers this parallel, it is striking to observe how in the Gospels the disciples play the role of the seers with Jesus as both the revealer and interpreter of the mystery. And inevitably, this mystery is about the story of Israel and God's coming work and judgment.[6]

Now the key point is this: Jesus' parables are not merely ways of communicating *information about* the coming kingdom but much more radically, they are a retelling and retooling of the very story of the OT, now centered and consummated in Jesus himself. Jesus is not just adding another phase to the story of Israel (though he is doing that in part), but is offering a new and alternative, Christ-centered worldview and inviting people to embrace this as their own. Thus, as Wright says, Jesus' parables "belong with, rework, reappropriate and redirect Israel's prophetic and apocalyptic traditions." They are part of his work as a prophet of judgment and renewal. The parables are not simply teaching or informing or making a moral or religious point. They are instead the vehicle for the paradoxical and dangerous campaign which Jesus was undertaking, namely a redefinition of the people of God and a reorientation of the grand story of Israel's hope.[7]

This insight is not only helpful for our overall understanding of Jesus' parabolic teaching, but will also prove to be crucial for our understanding of Matthew 13, where we will see a similar apocalyptic retooling of Israel's self-understanding, namely, that the great separation of God's people from those condemned is not based on ethnic Israel identity but faith-response in Jesus.

A PARABOLIC HOTSPOT—THE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM IN MATTHEW 13

We may now drill down to another layer of discussion and turn to the parables found particularly in Matthew. According to Snodgrass, there are between thirty-seven and sixty-five parables in the Synoptics, depending on what criteria are used to classify a saying or story as a parable.[8] Of the parables in the Synoptics, ten are unique to Matthew, and Matthew has concentrated and thematically arranged his parables especially into chapters 13, 18, 20-22, and 24-25.[9] There is no consensus on whether Matthew's parables reveal particular themes or tendencies relative to the other Gospels. Michael Goulder argued they tend to be more allegorical than others.[10] Snodgrass notes that they tend to operate on a grander scale with regard to numbers and the social status of his characters, and with a predominance of kingdom language.[11] But beyond this it is difficult to find great differences between Matthew's parables and

the others in the Synoptics.

For our purposes, the most important observation to make concerns the highly concentrated section of Matthew 13. While parables are found in various places in Matthew, even a cursory reading makes it clear that the "one stop shop" for understanding the parables in Matthew must be chapter 13. Not only do we find here an intricately structured set of seven parables, we are drawn to this chapter because it presents itself as the focal point of Jesus' parabolic teaching. It serves as the lodestar for our understanding of Jesus' parables in Matthew. It does so in a number of ways: (1) by virtue of its being one of Matthew's five major teaching blocks or discourses which draw attention to themselves throughout the narrative;[12] (2) through standing apart from the other discourses in that it consists only of parabolic teaching; (3) by offering two explicit fulfillment quotations from the OT regarding *why* Jesus is teaching in parables; and (4) through its placement at a crucial turning point in the overall narrative of the First Gospel.

GETTING A RUNNING START AT MATTHEW 13—THE NARRATIVE FLOW

It is this last point that provides a jumping off point for our understanding of the function of the parables in Matthew 13. To do so, we need to get a sense of how Matthew has structured his narrative as a clue to the purpose of the parables. Even as simple words between a husband and wife have greater meaning to each other—for good or for bad—because of the relationship and the amount of water that has "gone under the bridge" before that particular dialogue, so too, Matthew 13 comes to us with a lot of meaning pre-packaged into it because of the events that have happened in the preceding twelve chapters.

In brief, after a couple of chapters that describe Jesus' identity and origin (chapters 1-2), we meet the fiery, kingdom-preaching prophet John, and this segues right into Jesus' own proclamation of the arrival of God's kingdom (chapters 3-4). Chapters 5-9 hang together as a beautiful depiction of this kingdom kerygma, described as "the gospel of the kingdom."[13] This kingdom is imaged in a two-fold way, with teachings that describe life in the coming kingdom (the first major teaching block, Sermon on the Mount, chapters 5-7) and events that manifest the compassion and power of its King (chapters 8-9). All of this leads into the second of Matthew's five discourses (chapter 10), in which he sends out his newly-minted disciples to do the same kind of kingdom work as he has just modeled for them. While Jesus' teaching and ministry are met with great joy and acceptance by many, others express increasing consternation and opposition. So too he promises his disciples that they will encounter hostility on account of him (10:16-39). This functions as more than a simple prediction of future discipleship experience, but also as an important foreshadowing of the next two chapters. Chapter 11 describes misunderstanding and apathy on the part of many of Jesus' hearers. Then in chapter 12 we find the simmering opposition to Jesus boils over. Jesus has two knock-down, drag-out conflicts with the religious leaders of the day over the issue of Sabbath-observance. Beyond being merely a sharp theological dispute, this proves to be the turning point of the book. In response to these conflicts the Pharisees resolutely decide that Jesus is *not* from God and "take counsel together" to destroy him (12:14). The two different responses to Jesus now become stark and irrevocably concretized, especially for the Pharisees. The result is that they accuse Jesus of being demonic, a desperate attempt to explain his obvious power in conjunction with his equally frustrating "unorthodoxy" (12:22-37). How else can they explain the clear fact that he is very powerful? And their decision in 12:14 will eventually culminate in the end of the Gospels, with their putting Jesus to death.

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF MATTHEW 13—DIVINE CROP CIRCLES

Now all of this important story is what brings us to the crucial chapter 13. While there is much that could be said about each pericope within this chapter, equally important is the macro-level structure because this section is communicating at levels that go beyond the individual parables. There are distinct and directive patterns and pathways through this passage.

When we fly over this text with trained eyes we can begin to see that there is a structure or outline to be made out of the whole; it is not just a tangled mess, but is indeed a well-structured unit. Even as one may be lost in the midst of confusing Chicago streets, when one flies over in a plane the perfect symmetry and organization is perceivable by following the rows of street lamps. So too with Matthew 13.

It is at the altitude of the whole chapter that we can discern a pattern in these parables. We may begin by observing the non-accidental fact that there are seven parables and that these are organized by length and theme. There is one main parable to lead off, the "Sower" or the "Four Soils" (vv. 1-9). This parable is also in Mark and Luke, and there it also heads Jesus' parable teaching. This big parable is then followed by a question and answer time with the disciples (vv. 10-17) as they ask *why* Jesus is teaching in parables. He gives them a lengthy answer by quoting from Isaiah. Then, to complete this first part, Jesus unpacks and explains what this opening and important parable of the Sower means (vv. 18-23).

Then, notice that, after this opening parable, the remaining six parables come in two sets of three. We find the parable of the Wheat and the Weeds (vv. 24-30), another long story kind of parable like the Sower, followed by two little parables which are not of the story kind of parable but are really similes—"The kingdom of heaven is like this…"—a mustard seed growing into a tree, and leaven working through a whole lump of bread dough (vv. 31-33). All three of these go together as can be seen by verse 34 where the voice changes and we have another OT quote about parables. This is then followed by the explanation of the Wheat and Weeds story (vv. 36-43). We may also observe that all three of these parables (numbers 2, 3, 4) hang together around the common theme of spreading or growth.

Moving on, notice in the last three parables (numbers 5, 6, 7) we have the same situation in reverse. We hear two short similes—treasure hidden in a field, the pearl of great price (vv. 44-46)—followed by another longer, story parable of the Dragnet of fish (vv. 47-50), followed again by its explanation even as the Wheat and the Weeds was explained. And once again it is remarkable that these three parables hang together by the shared theme of value or worth and the discerning of value/worth. Additionally, we see that in verse 51 the flow shifts as Jesus then turns to his disciples and asks them if they understand.

There is also an observable flow and connection throughout all seven parables. The Sower is about a farmer sowing seed. This is closely followed by another farmer sowing seed but an enemy sowing weeds as well. Then the two similes continue the theme with a mustard seed being sown in a field and growing, followed by the saying about leaven in bread, the very thing made from the result of such farming activities, wheat flour. Similarly, the last three parables have a merchant/business theme (as compared to the farming) with the purchase of a field and treasure, the purchase of a treasured pearl, and the fishmonger sorting out saleable and non-saleable fish.

This kind of structure is not accidental but is a mark of thoughtful literature in the ancient world, the kind of thoughtfulness that makes a book be copied and passed down for millennia. And it is also the kind of structuring that is typical of Matthew.[14]

But yet more can be noted. Looking over this set of seven parables we can discern another important bit of information: the second and seventh parables are nearly identical. That is, they are

both story parables that describe a mixed group of good and bad (wheat and weeds; good and bad fish), they are both given explanations by Jesus (unlike the short simile parables), and both of the explanations are identical: they are about the end of the age when Jesus will come and separate out evildoers and cast them out of the kingdom (vv. 36-43; vv. 49-50, in short-hand form).

So what we have here is a highly-structured group of parables: An opening parable about a sower of seed and its interpretation in relation to the kingdom, two other major parables about the separation of good and bad and their interpretation as the end of the age when the kingdom comes, and four little parables about the hiddeness and great value of the kingdom.

THE SOWER, THE SECRET, AND THE SEPARATION— THREE INTERWOVEN THREADS

What are we to make of this patterning? Is it merely play or is it purposeful? I think it is the latter. There are three threads that run through this entire chapter and structure that, when examined, pull it all together. These are the Sower, the Secret, and the Separation.

The Sower

As was mentioned above, the parable of the Sower is found in each of the Synoptic Gospels as the heading over Jesus' parable teaching. What does this parable mean? We don't have to look far to get at least an initial answer to this query because Jesus goes on to unpack its elements. The Sower is Jesus himself; the seed is the message about the kingdom; the four different soils are four different kinds of people and their response to Jesus' message. Bearing good fruit is clearly the good thing here, as it is in several other places in Matthew as well.[15]

What we may not realize is that this parable is not primarily an *exhortation* to be fruit-bearing ourselves but is rather an *explanation* of the mixed reception to Jesus' kingdom message. Certainly the exhortation to us that we should be fourth-soil kind of people is there secondarily. We are right to feel the pinch and warning of the danger of not bearing fruit. We are right to be wary of trials causing our faith to wither (the second soil) and the danger of the cares of this world choking out our faith (the third soil). But reading the parable in its context, it becomes clear that primarily this parable serves to explain *why* the Great Sower, Jesus himself, meets with such mixed results with most people *not* receiving and believing! This parable is primarily *descriptive* of what happens when the Gospel seed is sown, by Jesus himself and, by extension, by his disciples as well. And this leads into the second thread-theme to note.

The Secret

One of the most interesting and unexpected elements of this story is what happens in verse 10. After Jesus preaches this parable of the Sower, the disciples are not sure what to make of it. They are perplexed. They have no idea what Jesus is doing. To feel the weight of their confusion one must think back to the narrative that precedes this text. These fishermen and tax collectors and political revolutionaries are following Jesus because they have seen his God-given miraculous powers and because every time he opens his mouth they amazed at his wisdom and authoritative and clear teaching. They are drawn by the power of Jesus and his teaching that speaks right to their hearts, fears, and hopes. Finally there is a prophet who seems to have the ear and mind of God, and he is offering this God as a gracious, loving Father to any who will follow him. That's all good. Nothing shows this better than the incredible teachings as summarized by Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount. What insight, wisdom, and clarity are found here, such that at the end of the Sermon everyone responds the same way: "Wow! He teaches as one with authority, not like our scribes!" (7:28-29).

But now here in chapter 13 Jesus' teaching seems crazy. What is this odd story? An appar-

ently careless farmer goes out and sows seed very poorly. Most of it is wasted on the road and clearly bad soil for sowing, and then one little portion produces an astronomical, unheard of, fairy-tale-like yield. What kind of sermon is this? What kind of story is this? What does this vague little story have to do with Jesus' teachings as in the Sermon on the Mount? We can easily imagine the disciples' perplexity: "What happened to that powerful, meaty teaching like Jesus used to give us?"

This is what motivates verse 10. The disciples come, probably rather sheepishly, and ask him why he is suddenly teaching with these vague metaphors, unlike his previous teaching. Jesus' response in verses 11 and following are crucial. His answer is as shocking as his parable is vague – "You disciples have been given the knowledge to understand these secrets (or mysteries) about the kingdom of heaven, but others are *not* given this knowledge." Even more, this revealing of secrets to some is happening to fulfill God's speech as given through Isaiah, namely, that as a word of judgment upon unbelieving Israel. Isaiah is sent to preach even though they will hear but not understand and they will see but not perceive because their hearts have become hardened. This is why Jesus is now teaching in parables—not to reveal the truth of God to all, but to conceal. There is a mystery—the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (verse 11)—that functions as a word of judgment. At the same time, Jesus offers an unprecedented word of blessing on his disciples: You are blessed because unlike many former prophets and righteous men, you do get to see and understand this mystery (13:16-17).

So, even though our tendency in Christian understanding is to think of Jesus' parables as evidence of his down-to-earth, relating-to-the-people teaching style, in reality they are just the opposite. The parables are notoriously unclear, especially when compared to the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, if Jesus didn't give us the explanation of some of these parables we would probably have no idea what they mean. The always-varied history of the interpretation of every parable is evidence of this unclarity.

So we learn from these verses that Jesus has changed his teaching style from speaking openly and plainly as he did in the Sermon on the Mount to teaching in this mysterious, secret way of parables. This is done so that people whose hearts are hard won't understand. It is not accidental that this shift occurs after the great opposition of chapter 12 and the religious leaders' resolution to destroy Jesus (12:14). Jesus changes his teaching style to this prophetic double-functioning mode so that he can simultaneously judge and proclaim. This is the nature of parables: They conceal and at the same time reveal if one understands the interpretation. If one is not given the knowledge to understand (by God) then the meaning remains a mystery, a secret. If one is given the knowledge then understanding and perception occurs. Therefore, this whole parable section hinges on this idea of the revealing and concealing of secrets.

The Separation

This then leads to the third and final of our interwoven threads. As we have just observed, the point of Jesus' parabolic teaching is to separate those with understanding from those without; it is the use of mysteries to conceal from some and reveal to others. We may also observe that this theme goes through all three of the major parables here in chapter 13. The Four Soils is a separating of responses into four types. Even more pointedly, the purpose of the second and seventh parables (the Wheat and the Weeds and the Dragnet of fish) is to separate the good from the bad. This is apparent not only in the parable stories themselves but also in their explicit, eschatological interpretation. Both parables speak of a separating of the good from the bad at the close of age when the Son of Man, Jesus, comes and renders reward and judgment.

We also have just seen this same theme of separation in the reference to Isaiah 6 in Matt 13:14-17. Isaiah 6 is the dynamic and memorable story

where Isaiah gets a vision of the Holy Lord in his Temple and is then commissioned by God to preach a message of repentance to wayward Israel. But God tells Isaiah that this message will not be received and accepted because of their hardness of heart. Yet, in the midst of this prophetic judgment there is a word of hope. Isaiah's hearers will not understand the message (literally, the "good news" or "gospel" in several places such as Isa 40:9; 52:7; 61:1) until the time of their judgment is complete. Yet even in the midst of this judgment Isaiah is told that God will leave for himself a holy seed, the stump of the tree of David (Isa 6:13), a remnant of those to whom God does reveal himself, and ultimately, the Messiah (Isa 11:1).

The clear reason why Jesus quotes these verses about his own teaching in parables is because he is saying that this reality is now fulfilled and consummated in him. He is the root of David, the ultimate prophet who preaches the mystery of the kingdom of God—the mystery that God has come incarnate in Jesus himself—and who is calling to himself a chosen remnant who will be granted understanding and insight into the mystery or secret. Unlike the tares amidst the wheat or the bad fish in the net or the first three soils, "Blessed are your eyes and ears," Jesus says, "because they see and hear" (13:16). The Great Separation is already occurring according to how one responds to Jesus and his message. All who follow Jesus are the holy remnant whom God has graciously preserved even in the midst of His justified judgment.

Herein lies the reason for the parable of the Sower: The message of the kingdom has always and will continue to meet with a mixed reception. Many will not care at all (the first soil); many will show interest but then fail to truly believe (the second and third soils); and some will truly see and hear and believe and bear fruit. This is because all people stand under the just judgment of God and none have good soil hearts. But in the mystery of God's will he graciously chooses some to understand and reveals himself to them.

Our overall point here is that Matthew 13 is a highly structured pattern of parabolic teaching. It is not just a concatenation of assorted parables to show Jesus as an interesting and engaging teacher. Rather, it is a set of parables which should be taken together as a whole. Woven throughout the whole chapter is a set of three themes which in concert speak a powerful truth: *Jesus' parabolic teaching is a sowing of the Word in the world. This Word from God is simultaneously a message of judgment on the unbelieving and a word of hope and blessing for the believing. The Word both reveals and conceals and in the process it performs a great separation of all people (cf. Heb 4:12), based on their response to the Son, the Incarnate Word.*

HAVING EARS TO HEAR—A WORD TO US

We would be remiss (and foolish) to approach such a passage as this and be content to merely analyze and dissect it. There is a great and sad irony that we could come to understand the separating function of the Gospel and conclude our study with mere observation and without sensing our need to respond. This is to treat Jesus and Holy Scripture as objects of our studied inquiry. Instead of seeking just to *understand* Matthew 13, we are called to a posture of *standing under* its message,[16] lest we prove ourselves to be unfruitful soil. What would God have us to know and how would he have us respond to this text?

I think the message to us comes off the page quite straightforwardly. First, regarding the Sower and the sowing: This word of the kingdom, the "gospel of the kingdom" as Jesus calls it, is still going forth through us today as Jesus' disciples. To be a disciple of Jesus means to do the same things he did, to live a life of self-sacrifice, serving others, to minister grace to broken lives, to turn the other cheek when wrongly accused, to be poor in spirit, to forgive others, and crucially, to *proclaim* the gospel of the Kingdom. All these things Jesus did and so we are to as well. No servant is greater than his master.

Second, regarding the secret: Following Jesus'

model we should not be surprised when it meets with every response from apathy to persecution. Such was true for Jesus and such is true for his disciples. Some will care not; some will believe for a while and then fall away. This is all very discouraging and disheartening when we put our time and money and energy in sowing the seed. But we must take heart that although many will not, some will hear and believe and their lives will be transformed. Hearts will go from being dead, clayish, dusty soil to deep, rich, fruit-bearing oaks of righteousness. So, as we go with the gospel we should expect a lot of failure. But just as with the four soils, the yield of even one fruit-bearer far outweighs any loss!

Finally, regarding the separation: a call to praise and thanksgiving. For those who do have ears to hear and who have eyes to see the hidden mystery of the gospel and who are not content to merely analyze the text but to submit to it, then there is an entirely natural and appropriate response—humble praise and thanksgiving to God. This is because we see in this text and we know in our hearts that our believing is not a choice on our part but is a revelation that is given. This is grace. We did not choose God. We did not reason in all our brilliance and decide that faith in God was an acceptable risk to take. We did not earn favor with God by our great faith and goodness and God-centered hearts and lives. Rather, we were dead in our sins and God made us alive through Christ Jesus' resurrection from the dead. For no reason other than mysterious grace we have been granted to understand the divine secret of the gospel even in the midst of God's just judgment on all of the world. If it were our choice it would not be divine revelation. For those who understand this, the only response can be praise and thanksgiving. Any response less than this fails to understand what the gospel is and the function of the parables as we see them in Matthew 13.

ENDNOTES

[1]Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

[2]N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

[3]Ibid., 175.

[4]Examples include Ezek 17:2-24; 23:1-49; 37:1-14; Jer 24:1-10; Dan 7:1-8; 8:1-27.

[5]Wright, *Jesus*, 177.

[6]Ibid., 178. For more discussion about how the theme of the revelation of mysteries in Daniel relates to Matthew and Jesus' teaching, one may consult my essay, "Refractions of Daniel in the Gospel of Matthew" in *Early Christian Literature and Intertextuality, Volume 1: Thematic Studies* (ed. Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias; London: T&T Clark, 2009), especially pages 74-80.

[7]Wright, *Jesus*, 180-81; quote from 180.

[8]Snodgrass, *Stories*, 22.

[9]Ibid., 23.

[10]Michael Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974), 54, 60. Snodgrass (*Stories*, 21) rightly critiques this as being overdone.

[11]Snodgrass, *Stories*, 21.

[12]One of the long-recognized and important observations to make about the Gospel of Matthew is that it contains five distinct and major blocks of Jesus' teaching or "discourse." These are (1) The Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5-7); (2) Instructions to the Disciples (ch. 10); (3) Parables of the Kingdom (ch. 13); (4) Instructions for the Church (ch. 18); and (5) Eschatological Teaching (chs. 24-25).

[13]Matthew's unique phrase, "the gospel of the kingdom" occurs three times: 4:23; 9:35; 24:14. The first two are especially important to note in terms of how they form a framing structure around Matthew 5-9. A close reading reveals that Matthew wants us to see chapters 5-9 as one unit with two parts, both picturing the "gospel of the kingdom". He does this by making the opening and closing sections of this unit match up in language. Compare 4:23-25 with 9:35-38.

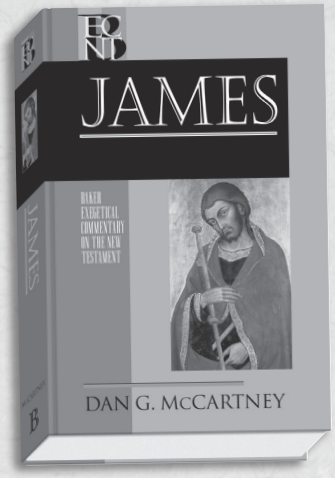
[14]Matthew is a master of structure. One helpful place to find a discussion and explanation of many aspects of structuring in the First Gospel is Dale C. Allison,

Jr., *Studies in Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

[15]Matt 3:8-10; 7:16-20; 12:33.

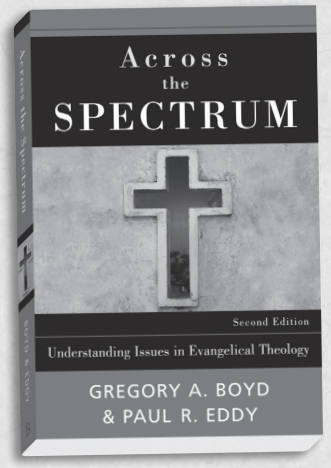
[16]For a helpful discussion of the essential posture for studying Scripture see Joel Green, *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

New from Baker Academic



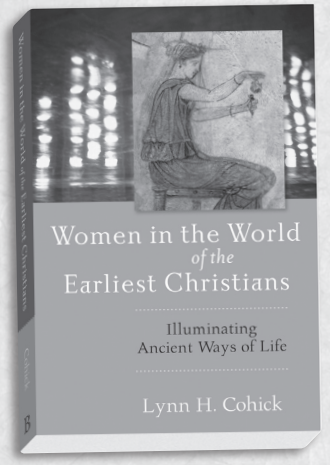
James
Dan G. McCartney
9780801026768 • 368 pp. • $39.99c
Available November 2009

"McCartney's commentary on James is a fresh and important contribution to the literature on James. He convincingly argues that faith plays a central role in the letter. . . . This work is exegetically rewarding, theologically rooted, and pastorally wise."—**Thomas R. Schreiner**, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary



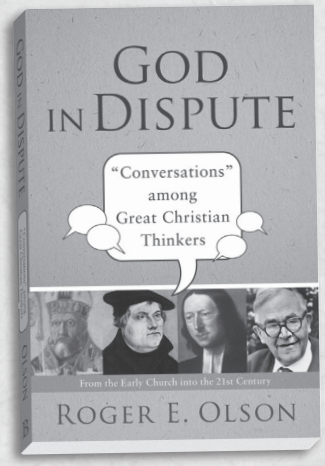
Across the Spectrum, 2nd ed.
UNDERSTANDING ISSUES IN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY
Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy
9780801037931 • 352 pp. • $24.99p

This accessible and comprehensive primer explores the breadth of viewpoints on major issues in evangelical theology by examining positions taken by evangelical scholars on seventeen seminal issues. The second edition retains the helpful features of the first edition and adds an appendix that addresses thirteen peripheral issues in contemporary evangelicalism.



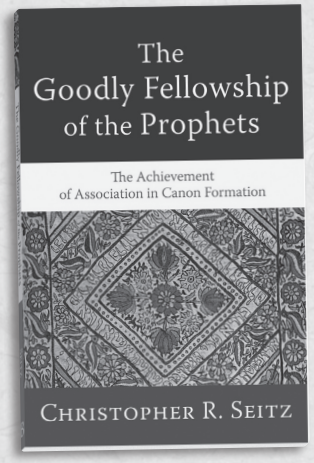
Women in the World of the Earliest Christians
ILLUMINATING ANCIENT WAYS OF LIFE
Lynn H. Cohick
9780801031724 • 352 pp. • $26.99p
Available November 2009

Cohick provides an accurate and fulsome picture of the earliest Christian women by examining a wide variety of first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman documents. She organizes the book around three major spheres of life: family, religious community, and society in general.



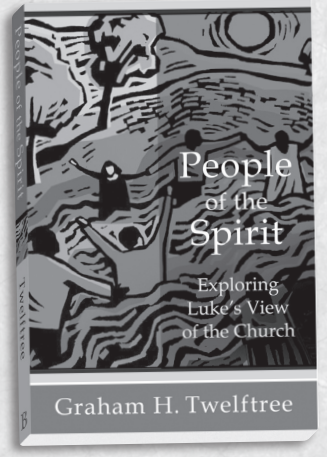
God in Dispute
"CONVERSATIONS" AMONG GREAT CHRISTIAN THINKERS
Roger E. Olson
9780801036392 • 304 pp. • $24.99p

"*God in Dispute* creatively presents significant issues in Christian doctrine through imaginary dialogues between giants in the history of our faith. Professors, students, and laypeople alike will find it a valuable resource."
—**Vincent Bacote**, Wheaton College



The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets
THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ASSOCIATION IN CANON FORMATION
Christopher R. Seitz
9780801038839 • 144 pp. • $19.99p

"Seitz offers an alternative vision of the Old Testament: its structural logic, its internal relationships, its history of formation. The result is incisive, exhilarating, and quite constructively provocative. It will be read and discussed with much profit by theologians, biblical scholars, pastors, and seminarians."—**Stephen B. Chapman**, Duke Divinity School



People of the Spirit
EXPLORING LUKE'S VIEW OF THE CHURCH
Graham H. Twelftree
9780801038808 • 272 pp. • $24.99p
Available October 2009

"By singling out Luke's canonical voice and reading his narrative as teaching, this book attains fresh perspective on what 'church' meant to the author of Luke-Acts, and what it should mean to us. . . . Engaged, intense, and clear!"—**Robert W. Yarbrough**, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Baker Academic

Available at your local bookstore, www.bakeracademic.com, or by calling 1-800-877-2665
Subscribe to Baker Academic's electronic newsletter (E-Notes) at www.bakeracademic.com

Forgiveness: Jesus' Plan for Healing and Reconciliation in the Church (Matthew 18:15-35)[1]

Dan Doriani

> Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"
>
> Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matt 18:21-22).

Dan Doriani is Pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Missouri.

Prior to his return to the pastorate, he served as Dean of the Faculty, Vice President of Academics, and Professor of New Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis from 1991 to 2003. Dr. Doriani is a frequent conference speaker and is the author of many books, including the two-volume *Matthew* in the Reformed Expository Commentary (P & R, 2008).

In an older conflict in the Middle East, several Americans and Europeans were kidnapped and held as hostages in Lebanon from 1985-1991. The hostages generally led a miserable life; beyond that certain captors took special interest in tormenting them. They repeatedly told Terry Anderson, the longest held hostage, that he would be released, only to dash his hopes at the last minute again and again. The captors played games with Lawrence Jenco, too. They discovered that he was susceptible to dizziness, so they would spin him around and around, then let him go. Dizzy and disoriented, he would bump into things, then fall over while the guards howled in laughter. Once, after he fell, one of the captors, wearing metal-tipped cowboy boots, stood on Jenco's head. Jenco couldn't defend himself, but he cried out, "I am not an insect! I am a person of worth!" Should Terry Anderson and Lawrence Jenco forgive their captors?

Should we forgive those who humiliate us and inflict physical or emotional pain on us? What about lesser offenses, acts of thoughtlessness, small betrayals, and "jokes" that amuse no one except the perpetrator? Everyone can remember offenses that make our pulse rise, whether they occurred yesterday or ten years ago, whether they happened in the kitchen or the athletic field, in the family room or the board room. At home, many were hurt by parents who meant well and tried

hard. Others suffered from fathers or mothers who neither cared nor tried. We were wounded by brothers and sisters who loved us dearly and by some who did not. Even in the church, we suffer from words spoken in haste or anger, from judgments rendered with cruelty, from promises made and not kept.

Curiously, the pain we feel may have little relationship to the offense. Sometimes it is harder to forgive small indignities, especially if they come from within the family or the church, for we expect better there. When a pagan sins against us, we half expect it. Do we suppose that strangers will sacrifice for us? Will they lay off the pursuit of their goals in order to accommodate us? No. So when they sin against us, we can say, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34, KJV).[2] When a brother sins against us, it hurts more because we do not expect it. It is hard to forgive them, for they *ought* to know what they do.

Christians offend each other with frightening regularity. That is why, as Jesus describes life in the family of faith in Matthew 18, he stresses the steps to take when one disciple sins against another. Since Jesus seeks harmony in the family of faith, he trains his disciples in the right way of resolving conflict. Sadly, we have many occasions to practice what Jesus preaches.

Even well-liked pastors probably suffer far more at the hands of their faithful members than from the local societies of atheists and agnostics. Church members contact us Sunday night or Monday morning to let us know how we failed and which persons we upset. We missed a crucial announcement, the music was too loud and fast, too soft and slow. And the sermon! Where can we begin? So our people try to make us conform to their concept of the ideal church. It's hard to decide: Is this behavior sinful, so that we should forgive it? Is it somewhat misguided sincerity that bothers us due to our pride?

Regardless of that, everyone who stays active in the church long enough will be wronged and it can be all the more painful because we expect the church to be our sanctuary, our joy. So then, beyond the pain itself, we feel the anguish of shattered expectations. Clearly, we need Jesus' plan for healing and reconciliation in the body of Christ.

RESTORING THE SINNER: THE BASIC PLAN (18:15)

Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you" (18:15). Every word counts here. First, the word "if" could be translated "if ever." The Greek form of the sentence is known as a general conditional sentence. Thus the point is not—if a brother ever happens to sin against you, do this and that. Rather, your brother *will* sin against you and there are principles to follow when he does.

Second, Jesus explains what to do whenever a brother *sins*. The topic is not hurt feelings, it is not annoying behavior, it is not etiquette. The topic is sin.

Third, the focus is sin "against you."[3] Galatians 6:1 says leaders should take steps to restore anyone who is overtaken by sin. James 5:19-20 says we are all responsible to restore a fellow believer who strays from the truth. Here Jesus says we are especially responsible to act when someone sins against us. The reasons are obvious. If someone sins against us, we have direct knowledge and experience of the sin. Further, if the sin is "against you," we are responsible to seek reconciliation of a broken relationship with a fellow Christian.

Fourth, Jesus says, "Go." Most Christians act as if Jesus said, "Sit and sulk." Or, "Tell someone else about it and hope they carry the news that you are offended back to the source." Or, "Act cold and withdrawn, until they guess that you are offended." Jesus says go, take responsibility. Too often, we consult with eight people about the best way to address the problem. Or we make pseudo-pious prayer requests. "We really must pray for Isadora [or Sylvester]. She is really struggling to control her tongue. Why, just the other day…." Jesus says, "Go!"

Fifth, we go and *reprove*. The term for reproof (*elenchō*) is used in two spheres: the realm of investigation and inquiry and the realm of proof and conviction. The two overlap and cohere. Investigation comes first. If the investigation uncovers a problem, the facts are essential to reproof of the sin.

If there is a sin, then, we do not simply share our feelings. We take a direct and loving approach to resolve matters quickly. We take both Scripture and evidence to prove there is a problem. We go gently, remembering our own sin (Gal 6:1). Therefore, we are not hasty to condemn. We can ask questions, allowing the offending brother to clarify. Perhaps things were not quite as they seemed. We can say, "It seemed to me that you did this, said that. Am I right? Did I miss something? Can you explain what happened?"

This is what God did when Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree. When the Lord came to them, he did not thunder accusations, he asked questions: "Where are you?", "Who told you that you were naked?", Have you eaten from the tree…?" (Gen 3:9-13). By asking questions, the Lord established dialogue and continued the relationship. We do the same by asking questions. It respects our brother because it assumes he has something to say.

Sixth, we go *privately*. The Greek reads, "between you and him alone." The reason is obvious. A private conversation allows real dialogue. Public rebuke is confrontational. It makes people feel that they are under attack. They become defensive and perhaps ashamed. Their first instincts are to defend themselves or to counterattack. Public rebuke hardly promotes listening. Jesus says the goal is to win your brother. A private talk is the way to do this.

There is exception to this: when a public person commits a public offense, it may demand a public rebuke. For example, Peter played the hypocrite and refused to associate or eat with certain Christians in Antioch simply because they were Gentiles. Thus on that occasion Paul had to rebuke him publicly (Gal 2:11-14). The situation would be the same in the rare case where someone openly taught heresy in an evangelical church.

Finally, we go *to win our brother*. The steps for resolving problems that arise when one Christian sins against another are clear, but easier said than done, because we fear conflict. We fear that our words will sound like an affront or an insult, we fear that comments on another person's sin will lead to a counterattack about ours. The antidote to these fears is to remember the goal of winning our brother. These principles may not work with secular people, who may not be humble and secure enough to heed a rebuke. And of course, some Christians will be defensive and self-righteous.

But disciples have every reason to be open to loving correction. After all, we confess that we are sinners and that establishes the right atmosphere: we are all under the Lord's discipline, trying to grow in him. We advance, in part, by addressing sin and rooting it out day by day. We readily hear counsel from each other, including loving admonition. Thus, we address errors before they become major problems. To do so is an act of love, as the law says, "Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt" (Lev 19:17).

We are neither shy nor rash. We do not love to go and chastise people, but neither do we shun it. It is both sad and necessary—a sad necessity. We are not touchy, going over trivia. But if we see clear sin, major sin, if it causes a rift in a relationship, we go to bring healing. How quick should we be to go? If a matter comes to mind again and again, if it inhibits sleep (consider Eph 4:26), if it disrupts worship (consider Matt 5:23), it is probably correct to go.

LISTENING TO EACH OTHER (18:15-17)

Listening comes up three times in our passage. If our brother or sister *listens*, we win them. If not, we take it forward from there. It may be worthwhile to think briefly about listening, which has three faculties.

First, we listen with our *ears*, to hear the

words. We try to follow what others say and what they mean. If a speaker struggles to articulate a thought, we help, knowing that some things are hard to express.

Second, we listen with our eyes, watching the eyes and the body of those who speak. Are they tense? Is there something more they want to say? Does their mouth say one thing and their body another? Proverbs 14:13 says "Even in laughter the heart may ache." As a professor, I noticed that students occasionally made appointments for the most trivial matters. Half a point on a quiz could be resolved in thirty seconds after class, but they wanted a thirty minute session. They came, we resolved the putative issue in two minutes, then they sat, a bit tense, on the edge of the chair, not quite ready to go. I would ask, "Is there something else you want to talk about?"

"Yes," they replied, "There is one other thing. I graduate in six months and I really don't know what to do, if you have another minute…."

Third, we listen with our heart. To listen with the heart is not to listen for emotions. In the Bible, the heart is the center of life, the core of our being. The Lord knows the secrets of the heart, tests the heart, weighs the heart, probes the heart (Ps 44:21; Prov 17:21, 21:2; Jer 17:10, 20:12). It is the source from which we speak and move. For this we must look and listen.

DISCIPLING THE IMPENITENT (18:16-17)

When we speak to a sinner, the goal is to win him. Praise God, many do listen and repent. But some are impenitent. They refuse to listen, refuse reconciliation. Jesus presents a series of principles for that case. It is not an exhaustive set of directions. For example, it assumes that there were witnesses, which makes the process clearer.

First, "if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses'" (18:16). This principle, taken from Moses' law (Deut 19:15), prevents false accusations and frivolous charges. (It also shows that Jesus customarily assumes that the church will live by the law of Israel). Ideally, we hope we never need to take multiple witnesses. We hope the sinner heeds correction. Ideally, we point out the sin, encourage repentance, with a light and loving touch, and the matter is resolved, so that we need not proceed to more ominous steps.

Second, however, if the first attempt at restoration fails, the injured party brings witnesses. These would be witnesses to the offense, which is assumed to be significant and public. For a private offense, witnesses might testify that an attempt at reconciliation had taken place.[4]

Third, if the sinning brother still fails to respond, the church takes up the matter.[5] If someone remains impenitent, the church will "treat him as you would a tax collector and a sinner" (18:17). Jesus is not here telling the disciples that they ought to treat tax collectors poorly. In fact, Jesus welcomed them, along with other sinners. He does not say, "Treat them as *I* treat tax collectors," he says, "Treat them as you (currently) treat them—as people who stand outside the community and its fellowship" (cf. Rom 16:17-18). That is, excommunicate them, while retaining hope of reconciliation through a fresh encounter with the gospel (1 Thess 3:14-15).

This plan is remedial, not punitive. It allows the sinner to see the gravity of his rebellion, so he may repent (1 Cor 5:1-11). It protects and purifies the church and prevents bad examples from leading others astray.

ACCEPTING THE MANTLE OF LEADERSHIP (18:18-20)

Jesus lays a heavy mantle upon his church leaders as they go through the process that we call church discipline. It is such a heavy responsibility that Jesus assures the church of his presence in it. He says, "Whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (18:18).

In times past, certain popes claimed that Jesus

gave Peter and his successors the right to determine who could and who could not enter heaven. They claimed the authority to declare people anathema—condemned to hell. During one tragic era before the Reformation, three rival popes each condemned the other two and all their followers, so that everyone in Europe had been condemned to hell by someone who claimed to be pope!

We can establish the meaning of the keys of the kingdom by remembering that keys open doors and lock doors. To "loose," aptly, means to open something. To "bind" is to close it. So if someone has the keys to the kingdom, he opens or closes the door to the kingdom. Those who hold the keys have a duty: to open the door, and so grant entry into the kingdom, or to close the door and so forbid entry into the kingdom. How so?

Notice that Jesus says this to Peter immediately after his confession that Jesus is Christ, Son of God and Savior. When Peter proclaims this message, he uses the keys. His message opens the door to heaven for all who believe it. The same message also closes the door to all who reject Jesus. When we proclaim Christ, we do the same. We do not open or close the door on our own authority. Speaking for the Lord, we say, "Believe in Jesus and the door to eternal life is open, even now. Reject him and it is closed."

Matthew 16:19 literally reads, "Whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound."[6] That is, what we bind or loose has already been bound or loosed in heaven. We do not determine who enters heaven and who is shut out. When we proclaim that a man or woman can attain eternal life only by trusting in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior, we only re-state what God already stated. If someone believes the gospel of Jesus Christ, he gains entry into God's kingdom. If not, the same gospel forbids that they enter the kingdom. This is the message every sound church proclaims.

So then, whatever we say repeats God's prior word. That is, Jesus promises well-functioning leaders that their judgments will reflect his. Jesus here commands his disciples to bind the unrepentant and to tell them they cannot expect to enter the Kingdom if they persist in clear sin, despite serious warning. Believers are repentant; they petition God for grace. Refusal to repent, on the other hand, is a mark of unbelief, and at the last extremity requires that someone be treated as an unbeliever. When leaders take such steps, Jesus says, they do not speak on their own authority. They merely reassert what the Lord already asserted, from heaven.

God rules his kingdom by grace, but he is not permissive. He does not automatically bestow grace on everyone. He grants grace to those who confess their sin, repent, and turn to Jesus for forgiveness. If someone refuses to repent or trust Jesus or follow him, they refuse his grace and have no place in his kingdom.

Is any ecclesiastical task more excruciating than pressing on with someone who refuses to repent? Facts can be murky, motives mixed. For this sad task, Jesus gave a rich promise: "If two of you on earth agree, about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven" (18:19). We use this promise in the context of prayer and rightly so. But people abuse it when they promote the conceit that God will or must give absolutely anything we request if enough people agree and have enough faith.

Not only does this view effectively dethrone God by binding him to our wishes, it also misses the chief point of the passage, which is that the Lord is with his people in the agony of church discipline. He does not promise that if two people agree about anything whatsoever that he will grant it. He promises to aid his disciples when we meet to heal broken relationships in the church. The Greek word translated "anything" points this way. The term is better translated "matter" or "case" and refers to matters that the church has to consider.[7]

Finally, Jesus promises his presence when two or three gather to pursue the lost and win them: "I am with you" (18:20). The process of seek-

ing reconciliation can be painful. But we do not despair, for the Lord is with us, as we work to win our brothers and to guard the purity of the church.

What a blessed community would be ours if we followed Jesus' counsel. Everyone would seek the lost and everyone would seek to restore those who have sinned against them. Leaders would assist with the hardest tasks of discipline and restoration, knowing the Lord is with them. Throughout, we would seek his healing grace for others and, as we do, we would consider again the mercy he showed us when he welcomed us into his presence despite our sin.

By implication, if someone comes to reprove you, you should receive him. You may not want to hear his rebuke, but if he is a decent man, he takes no pleasure in the visit either. So listen, knowing he comes in a spirit of love and concern. Besides, an attempt at loving correction cannot harm us. If our brother is right, he blessed us by pointing out our sin, so that we may repent and reform. If he is wrong, we have had a season of self-examination, which cannot hurt us (cf. Prov 9:9). Some people so fear a confrontation that they feel they cannot do this. Pastors sometimes have conversations with distraught people that go this way:

"I am absolutely at my wits' end about my relationship with Kate [or Michael]. I've prayed and prayed. I've tried to be nice. I've tried to avoid her. What else can we do?"

"Tell me what happened when you talked to her."

"Oh, I could never talk to her."

But if we convince ourselves that we cannot talk to the offender, we may think we are at the end of our wits when, in fact, we have not even taken the first step in Jesus' plan for reconciliation. By confronting sin, we demonstrate that the Lord, and therefore the church, has standards. People often say that the church is a hospital for sinners, and rightly so, but the church is not a home for proud, unrepentant sinners. The church is a hospital for sinners, but the patients must at least *want* to become healthy. The Lord is holy, and he is merciful and gracious when we fail, and he forgives when we repent. But he insists that we at least try to live in obedience.

True disciples live under the discipline of God's law and under the discipline of repentance. Teachers warn, exhort, encourage, and point out sin. In a healthy church, we are accustomed to candor about sin. We form the habit of confessing sin and seeking grace from the Lord and from each other. If we practice such candor, we will find it much easier to listen and repent when someone speaks to us about our sin.

PETER'S QUESTION (18:21-22)

The process of church discipline raises two questions. First, if it does not work, will we have the stomach to continue? Second, if it does work, are we then *bound* to forgive the offender? When Peter said, "How many times shall I forgive my brother?", he was proposing the second question. The second question has a corollary: if we forgive, must we *forget*? Must we act as if it nothing happened? We can enlarge Peter's question this way: "I understand that if my brother sins against me, I must confront him. I also know how to proceed if he refuses to listen. But what if the first step works, so that he listens? I presume I must forgive him. But what if he offends me repeatedly? How many times do I have to forgive? Seven times?"

This is a sincere and vital question. Peter surely thought he was generous to offer to forgive seven times. Some roughly contemporary rabbis limited forgiveness to three instances of premeditated sin, since such repentance might not be genuine.[8] If Peter was aware of this, he might have intended to be gracious when he more than doubled that number. But Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (18:22).

One time when I spoke on this theme a woman approached me afterward with a similar question. She was having trouble with her neighbors. She had a cat who wandered into her neighbor's yard occasionally. The neighbors were aggressive; one day they picked up her cat and lobbed it back into

their yard. Remembering that good fences make good neighbors, they decided to put one up. But the neighbors didn't like the fence's sight lines, so while the owners were out, they got a saw and cut several inches off the bottom of the fence in certain spots. Unfortunately, when the neighbors cut the bottom of the fence, the cat was able to get into their yard again. When that happened, the neighbors *killed* the cat and lobbed its body over the fence. That made a total of three offenses! Was Jesus saying they had to forgive their neighbors (who, somewhat dubiously, claimed to be Christians) for these three offenses and then keep going?

These are the questions: Do we have to forgive everyone for every offense? What if the offender is not sorry? What if there is a history of mistreatment? Does Jesus want us to let people take advantage of us?

Notice that the specific topic is offenses between brothers in the Christian community. Among Christians, there are special resources for reconciliation, especially if the sinner is penitent. We have a different situation when the offender is not a Christian, or when there is no remorse. We can enumerate the possible situations and some of the responses they require as follows:

First, if a brother (or sister) sins against us and repents, Jesus declares that we must forgive. Second, if a secular person sins against us and expresses sorrow, we should take it as a happy surprise, a common grace, and gladly forgive. Third, if a secular person sins against us and shows no remorse, we still forgive in a limited sense. Jesus never says we must forgive and forget everything everyone does. But he does say, "Love your enemies" (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27). He forbids bitterness, rage, and hatred. The Lord is long-suffering and patient, abounding in mercy. We are made in his image; therefore, we should be patient and merciful. The Bible says God loved us while we were yet sinners (Rom 5:8). Therefore, we should love others while yet sinners—even if they sin against us. We cannot harbor malice toward them, but must pray that they come to faith. The final case is the most challenging. Even if a Christian brother sins against us and refuses to express sorrow or make amends and we must follow the harrowing steps of church discipline, we do so with inner love. We do not harbor inner anger or presume to judge their hearts. We hope they cease to be obstinate lest they face final judgment. In this sense, we forgive them, even if we do not "forget" their offense in the sense of pretending it did not occur. In short, we must always forgive with the heart even if we must rebuke sin (and sinners) and take steps to prevent them from wronging either us or others again.

In general, we forgive, but we do not act like wimps and do not let people shove us around. For example, if someone tells a pernicious lie about me, I must forgive the liar, but I can also insist that he help set the record straight. In other words, the phrase "forgive and forget" can be misapplied. After someone sins against us, we are not bound to pretend nothing ever happened. If a neighbor borrows money and fails to repay it, then comes to borrow more, we must forgive the offense, but we have no obligation to extend a second loan. When someone errs, we teach them, patiently hoping "God will grant them repentance" (2 Tim 2:24-25).

Still, Jesus says we must forgive repeatedly. There is a slight variation in the translations because the original is ambiguous. It probably means seventy-seven times but could mean seventy times seven. But whatever the translation, the point is the same. We can count up to three offenses and think: I forgive you once, twice, three times … and next time I take vengeance! We can even count to seven sins: One, two, three, four, five, six, *seven*—and now you're mine, fool! But no one can count sins and hold their rage until seventy-seven. Forgiveness either becomes a way of life or we give up or blow up. Unlimited forgiveness seems impossible for unaided human nature. Therefore Jesus tells a story to motivate us to forgive in 18:23-34.

THE UNFORGIVING STEWARD (18:23-34)

The story is straightforward. A king examines his finances and notices missing funds (18:23-24): "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him." The king summons his chief steward, evidently a high-ranking slave, to account for the deficit. The steward is responsible for the debt, but cannot repay it. He and his family shall be sold as a result, chiefly as a punishment, but also to pay a fraction of the debt (18:25).

We sense that the debt, 10,000 talents, is large. But how large? Notes in older study Bibles sometimes say 10,000 talents equals millions of dollars, but we can be far more precise. First, while the English term "talent" signifies a skill or ability, in New Testament times a talent was a unit of weight for valuable metals, chiefly silver. One talent was about seventy-five pounds of silver. Therefore, 10,000 talents equaled 750,000 pounds or 375 tons of silver. But there is a better way to set the value of a talent. One talent equaled 6000 denarii. A denarius was a day's wage. Thus one talent equaled 20 years' wages for a common laborer. Therefore 10,000 talents equals 200,000 years wages or 60 million days' wages. Although people earn much more in buying power today, it would not be misleading to think, in today's terms, of a debt of several billion dollars. That a slave could owe it is also barely conceivable. Since the servant could be sold, we assume that he was a slave. Slaves lacked freedom of movement and many other rights, but they could receive pay, own property, and enter many fields of labor. People became slaves through war, debt, or birth, but a tiny number sold themselves into slavery to gain security or an education, or to hold some of the few high positions, such as city treasurer, that were commonly occupied by slaves. A treasurer could conceivably accrue such a vast debt.[9] Yet, to put it another way, Josephus pegged the total annual tax yield of Palestine (which included Judea, Samaria, Galilee and more) at only 8,000 talents – 2,000 less than the one servant owed.[10]

No laborer could reimburse such a debt, yet the servant begs the master for time to repay it: "Be patient with me … and I will pay back everything" (18:26). This request is so ludicrous that we wonder whether the servant is a fool or if he thinks his master is a fool. Yet, in an amazing reversal, the king does more than his faithless steward asks. Instead of granting time to repay the debt, the king "took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go" (18:27). He called the debt a loan, forgave it, and dismissed his steward.

The steward promptly meets a fellow slave, who owes him a smaller debt, 100 denarii. Strangely, the steward "began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me,' he demanded" (18:28). Now 100 denarii is a substantial debt. As we said, a denarius is a days' wage, hence the debt is 100 days' wages. Counting days of rest, a man might earn 100 denarii in about four months. Most people would be quite concerned if someone owed them four months' wages. On the other hand, the king just forgave a far greater debt—600,000 times more, to be precise.

At this point, the second servant "fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back'" (18:29). This plea sounds familiar; these are almost the same words the steward used before the king as he pleaded for mercy moments earlier (in 18:26). We hear the similarity, but evidently the steward did not. He tossed his fellow servant into debtor's prison, "until he could pay the debt" (18:30).

Other servants witness this and report it to the king, who calls his steward to account a second time. "'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' (18:32-33).[11] Then the master turned the steward over to the jailers to be tortured until he repaid his debt" (18:34).

In case we have any doubts, Jesus gives us a key to the interpretation of the parable in the last

verse, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (18:35). The significance of each character in the parable is clear:

- The king represents God the Father, as he calls people to account for their sin, extends mercy to us, but then requires us to show mercy.
- The steward or debtor is "you"—a man or woman to whom God offers mercy.
- The debt, by implication, is what each person owes to God.

When people listen to a story, they have two impulses. The first is to identify with someone in the story, perhaps the hero. Second, we evaluate the characters in the story. We approve or disapprove of what they do. It is easy to evaluate this story. The king is generous, and although he seems soft at the beginning, we see that he has standards by the end. The steward is repulsive. The king forgives his vast debt, then he throws his partner into prison for something so much smaller.

But with whom can we identify? Not the king. We are not billionaires, nor do we forgive billion dollar debts. Besides, Jesus says the king represents God. This leaves only two other characters—the slave who chokes or the slave who is choked—the choker or the chokee. Jesus wants us to identify with the choker.

First, like the choker, we owe God a vast debt. The debt represents everything we owe God—all the love, covenant loyalty, and obedience we should have rendered. The vast debt in the parable represents our vast sin before God. Second, we do owe smaller debts to each other. We do offend one another in many ways, small and great, some of them very painful. Jesus represents this with the smaller but still substantial debt.

We see why Jesus set up the parable this way. Jesus just described the process when a brother sins against us. Peter asks, what if it works? How often do I have to forgive? We have the same question: When can I stop forgiving and throttle the sinner, the miscreant who needs to taste a little vengeance? We wonder, as Peter did, how many times do I have to forgive?

We know the feeling when a family member or a so-called friend pulls the same trick we have seen one hundred times. When our sweet-talking boss makes another promise he cannot keep. When a senseless "friend" humiliates someone again. When a self-important peer mouths off. When that bossy neighbor criticizes your house and yard once more.

Then our fingers begin to twitch and we think: Enough forgiveness! Surely it is time to choke a little. Sadly, we play the role of the steward at times; we would rather choke than forgive. So we need Jesus' warning: "This is how my Father will treat you unless you forgive your brother" (18:35).

Readers are torn. We identify with the choker, but we are also repelled by him. Who wants to receive mercy one moment and deny it the next? We think, "That is not me! I repudiate it!" This is the wisdom and mercy of Jesus. He shows us our worst tendency, not through an accusation, but through a story that lets us rebuke and correct ourselves.

WARNING TO THE MERCILESS (18:32-35)

In the story, the problem of the unforgiving steward remains. The king rebukes him: "Wicked slave, all that debt I forgave you because you begged me to. Was it not necessary for you to have mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" (18:32-33, author's translation). Yes, those who receive mercy must show mercy. If the king has such mercy on us, his mercy must touch our hearts.

So the parable leads us to repent. But the parable is more than a story. It is also a veiled prophecy of the future. Jesus tells the parable under the shadow of the cross. Soon enough, he will go to Jerusalem for the last time. He will be condemned to death and he will die—for our sins. (This prophecy brackets our section, in

16:21, 20:17).

In the story, the king forgives the vast debt, loses all his money, by a word. But in the real world, the debt is forgiven not by a word, but at the price of Jesus' blood, which he will soon shed.

In a sense, therefore, the king in the parable represents God the Father. But in a sense, Jesus is the king. Jesus is the final source of mercy. He also warns Peter and warns us. If you know the king's mercy, then you must show the king's mercy. If you cannot forgive others, then you do not truly grasp the king's forgiveness. The conclusion of the story, in the parable, and Jesus' final remark outside the parable both state the warning. The story says, "In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed." Then Jesus adds, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (18:34-35).

Paul says, "Note then the kindness and the severity of God" (Rom 11:22, ESV). His kindness leads him to forgive all our debt, if we ask. But his severity rebukes all sin, including the sin of hard-heartedness. If we love God's grace, then we must extend grace, or we don't understand grace at all. A failure to forgive, Jesus' parable says, raises doubts that the one who was wronged ever tasted God's grace. A refusal to forgive casts that person's forgiveness into doubt. As Jesus said "So will the Father treat you, unless you forgive" (18:35).

What Jesus asks is not easy. Sometimes we want to forgive, but we cannot seem to let go of our hurt. It can be easier to forgive the sin of a stranger or a pagan than a close friend, a relative, or a fellow Christian. We expect mistreatment from some strangers and foes. Whatever they do, we can say, "What do you expect?" We can forgive them, because they know not what they do.

But we expect more from fellow believers. In the church, we expect to find honesty, love, and compassion. Relationships with family and long-time friends can be hard too. The longer we are together, the more love and laughter we share. But more time also means more opportunity for offense, for hurt feelings. And the wounds of a friend hurt the most.

We do hurt one another—more than we like to admit. We speak carelessly, we forget promises, we fail to offer help in an hour of need, and more. But we must learn to forgive. It is right before the Lord, who forgave us so much more. It also blesses us when we forgive. If we harbor anger or bitterness, the Lord wants us to consider. We need to forgive. We ought to forgive—for our own benefit, for the benefit of our brothers and sisters, and above all because we love and honor Jesus, who first forgave us.

The life of the hostages in Lebanon was brutally difficult. They lived in tiny, dark, suffocating cells. They suffered extreme heat and cold. They lived in filth and constantly battled vermin. They were blindfolded and chained. They were often alone; when together, they might be forbidden to speak. How did the hostages feel toward their captors? At their release, a reporter asked if they had a message for his captors. One, who explicitly identified himself as a non-christian, replied with icy hatred, "Yes, I hope you die a slow and painful death." When they put the same question to Terry Anderson, he replied, "I don't hate anyone. I'm a Christian. I am required to forgive, no matter how hard it may be." Perhaps Anderson was filled with rage at the beginning, but he had years to meditate on his condition, so that he finally saw it aright, through the work of Jesus Christ. As we meditate on the work of Christ, we can extend the same love and mercy when someone wounds us.

God has forgiven us a vast debt. As a result, we owe him our mind, our heart, our will. Our passage summons us to give ourselves to the Lord not through an act of obedience or service, but by letting his mercy sink into our mind and heart. God has forgiven you "all that debt," not by a mere word, but by the life and blood of his Son. Since the Lord had such mercy on us we must have mercy and forgive others.

ENDNOTES

[1]This article is adapted from Daniel Doriani, *Matthew* (2 vols.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008), 2:89-90, 150-68.

[2]Most, but not all, manuscripts have this sentence.

[3]Most, but not all, early manuscripts have the words "against you." The Greek words for "against you" are very short (εἰς σὲ) and sound the same as the ending of a Greek word for "sins" that is like the word in 18:15, but longer. Since groups of copyists sometimes wrote as one person read, the similarity of sounds may best explain the omission of these words from many manuscripts.

[4]D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 403-04.

[5]The three step procedure is found in other contemporary sources. W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1964), 221ff.

[6]Translations tend to avoid this phrasing, sometimes for sophisticated reasons. For a defense of the literal reading, see Carson, *Matthew*, 373.

[7]The Greek is *pragmatos* (πρά́γματος). See Duncan Derrett, "'Where Two or Three Are Convened in My Name…' A Sad Misunderstanding" *Expository Times*, 91 (1979-80), 83-86.

[8]Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 456.

[9]See Richard Horsley, "Slavery in the Greco-Roman World," *Semeia* 84 (2001): 41-55; M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: Viking, 1980), 93-122; P. R. C. Weaver, *Familia Caesaris: A Social Study of the Emperor's Freedmen and Slaves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1972); Bruce Winter, "St. Paul as a Critic of Roman Slavery in 1 Corinthians 7:21-23," *Pauleia* 4 (1998), 1-20; S. S. Bartchy, "Slavery," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (ed. Geoffrey Bromiley; 4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979-88), 4:539-46.

[10]Josephus, "Antiquities of the Jews," in *The Works of Josephus* (trans. William Whiston; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 319 (section 12.4.4.).

[11]Syntactically, the original reads this way, "Wicked slave, all that debt I forgave you." The forward location of "all that debt" places emphasis on that phrase.

The Parable of the Generous Vineyard Owner (Matthew 20:1-16)

A. B. Caneday

PRECAUTIONS CONCERNING PARABLES

Interpreting Jesus' parables is fraught with dangers as witnessed throughout the history of interpretation.[1] In a sense, explaining a parable is like explaining a riddle or perhaps a joke. As explanation "spoils" a riddle for the quick-witted and indulges the dull, so explanation tends to diminish the genius of Jesus' parables and shortcuts delight for those who hear with understanding. Nevertheless, occasionally Jesus concedes to his torpid Twelve and provides for them his own explanation of his parables (e.g., see Mark 4:13-20; 7:17-23), setting an example for Christian teachers and ministers to follow.

As with several of the accepted titles for Jesus' parables "The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard" seems misdirected, for the parable's evident focal point of similarity between the "kingdom of heaven" and the earthly analog is not the human workers but the human owner (*anthrōpō oikodespotē*) of the vineyard who stands in contrast to them—thus the title, "The Parable of the Generous Vineyard Owner."[2] This modified title features a catchword that evidently links the parable's "good" vineyard owner (Matt 20:15) to the earlier narrative concerning Jesus' exchange with the Rich Young Man who inquired, "Teacher, what *good* thing must I do in order that I might have eternal life?" Jesus responded, "Why do you inquire concerning the *good* thing? Only one is the *Good One*" (19:16, 17).

As accepted titles tend to mislead understanding, so do other common popular assumptions and uses of the parables. Contrary to popular notion, Jesus does not teach the crowds with parables to reveal his message so that even the most spiritually dull hearers will understand. Nor does he design his parables as clever illustrations to alleviate misunderstanding of his identity.[3]

A. B. Caneday is Professor of New Testament Studies & Biblical Theology at Northwestern College in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

He has written many scholarly articles, including contributions to two recent edited volumes: *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies* (Paternoster, 2009) and *A Cloud of Witnesses: The Theology of Hebrews in its Ancient Context* (T. & T. Clark, 2008). Dr. Caneday is co-author (with Thomas R. Schreiner) of *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (InterVarsity, 2001).

The purpose of Jesus' parabolic teaching has a frame of reference, namely, the Old Testament. Behind the Greek *parabolē* stands the Hebrew *māšāl*, which the LXX translates as *parabolē* in all but five of its thirty-three instances occurrences. As such, *parabolē* is elastic, referring to proverbs, maxims, similes, allegories, fables, analogies, riddles, taunts, wisdom oracles, and dark enigmatic sayings. Jesus' parables fall along this spectrum. Best known are his story parables narrated by each evangelist in the parable discourse (Matt 13:1-53; Mark 4:1-34; Luke 4:4-30). Jesus also utters pithy parabolic maxims (Matt 9:14-17; Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39), parabolic riddles (Matt 22:41-46; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 41-44), and parables designed to be understood by his enemies to provoke them to carry out their murderous conspiracy against him (Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19).[4]

Enigmatic as his parables are, so is the purpose of Jesus' parables, prompting misunderstanding, even avoidance of the Gospel writers' plainly stated explanations of why Jesus teaches in parables. They have a double force, for they simultaneously reveal and conceal things concerning the gospel of the kingdom. Jesus' disciples ask, "Why do you speak in parables to the crowds?" (Matt 13:10; Mark 4:10; Luke 8:9). Jesus plainly tells his disciples,

> To know the mysteries of heaven's reign has been given to you, but not to those. For whoever has, to that one will be given even more. And whoever does not have, even what that one has will be taken away. Because of this I speak to them in parables, that seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, with them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled (Matt 13:11-14).[5]

Again, in the midst of narrating the parable discourse, Matthew uniquely explains,

> Jesus spoke all these things in parables to the crowds and without a parable he said nothing to them so as to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet saying, "I will open my mouth in parables; I will pour forth what has been hidden from the foundation of the world" (Matt 13:34, 35; citation of Psalm 78:2).[6]

As with parables in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, Jesus' parables—by bearing the double force of revealing and concealing—convey an indicting and judging aspect. In addition to ways that Jesus' parabolic teaching fulfills Asaph's saying of Psalm 78 as outlined by D. A. Carson, it seems Jesus' teaching in parables entails judgment as does Asaph's psalm.[7] The psalm's extended recitation of the Lord's covenant faithfulness and repeated refrain of Israel's persistent unfaithfulness is parabolic. Thus, to recite the psalm is to recite a parable, and recitation calls for hearing. Rehearsal requires understanding. Retelling this psalm demands wisdom to discern its parables that warn of Israel's judgment, that is, defiant, rebellious, and covenant breaking Israel. Whoever hears or sings Asaph's psalm without discerning its parables incriminates oneself with the judgments orally rehearsed.

Likewise, Jesus' parables call for hearing with discernment which is the featured significance of the parable of the Sower narrated by each Synoptic Gospel.[8] The parable is a veiled presentation about hearing the gospel of the kingdom (Matt 13:1-9; Mark 4:1-9; Luke 8:4-8), followed, first, by Jesus' stated purpose for teaching in parables and, second, by his explanation of the Sower (Matt 13:10-23; Mark 4:10-20; Luke 8:9-15). Mark cogently records, "You do not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?" (4:13), disclosing the preternatural genius of Jesus' parables: every time someone retells his parables, revealing and concealing invariably take place. Either one listens with discernment or one hears with gradations of impairment, even hearing sounds without registering.

Jesus' parables conceal the truths of the king-

dom of heaven within plainly spoken earthly analogies for all to hear. "Whoever lacks discernment, even what one does have will be removed, but whoever has discernment receives even greater" (Matt 13:12).[9] Consequently, one does not haphazardly engage deciphering Jesus' parables except to one's own peril, even whether writing or reading an essay in a theological journal that concerns Jesus' parables.

Hearing without understanding manifests itself in varying degrees and ways. For example, failing to discern that Jesus' parables teach heavenly realities by way of earthly analogies, many suppose that Jesus' concerns are this-world-focused, even socio-political. Thus, some impose upon Jesus' parable of the Generous Vineyard Owner a foreign ideology such as Marxism as though Jesus were rebuking economic practices of his day as he "foresaw a society of simple communism, ruled by God" in concert with much that Karl Marx taught.[10] So, one contends, "In his parable of the vineyard laborers, the point is that workers receive not according to their work but according to their need."[11] Others, evidently afraid to offend Jewish sensibilities and to be accused of being anti-Semitic, recast Jesus as "a teacher connected with the Pharisaic tradition" and reject the traditional understanding of Matt 20:1-16 addressing Pharisees.[12] Culbertson reacts against interpreters who believe that Jesus tells the parable against the Pharisees, for it is unthinkable that Jesus tells a parable that entails a vineyard that does not represent Israel. So, he insists that the Jesus of "Pharisaic identity" offers the parable "as a message of comfort to the Jewish people in a time of crisis and upheaval."[13] To do this Culbertson rejects the connection between the parable (20:1-15) and the saying, "Thus, the last will be first, and the first last."[14]

Still others become so entangled in discussing details concerned with day-laborers in first-century Israel that they get lost in the accretions of their own historical reconstructions including literary parallelisms found in rabbinic writings.[15] Thus, they refocus the meaning of the parable in line with their modern sensibilities, prejudices, and historical-critical reconstructions.

Use of parables isolated from their literary contexts also leads to incorrect interpretations and wrongful conclusions concerning individual parables. Isolation treats parables as individual units that become illustrations of timeless spiritual and eternal truths. Not all isolation of parables from their contexts occurs at the hands of novices who tend to read the Bible devotionally in solitary bits and pieces. In quest of the authentic sayings of the historical Jesus, scholars often resort to isolation in their attempt to identify the original meaning and context of parables. The parable of the Generous Vineyard Owner suffers such abuse.[16]

Unlike Luke's account, Matthew and Mark follow the narrative concerning Jesus' encounter with the Rich Young Ruler and Peter's assertion, "Look, we have left everything and followed you" (Matt 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-28) with Jesus' aphorism, "But many who are first will be last, and last ones first" (Matt 19:30; Mark 10:31). Unique to Matthew's Gospel, following Jesus' aphorism is the Generous Vineyard Owner (Matt 20:1-16). Placement of this parable and the fact that the aphorism follows the parable as a punctuating inclusio (20:16)[17] suggests on the surface that the parable explains the chiastic and aphoristic inclusio but now inverted, "In this manner, the last shall be first and the first last."[18]

THE PARABLE OF THE GENEROUS VINEYARD OWNER

Human Story; Heavenly Meaning

Jesus announces that heaven's reign (*hē basileia tōn ouranōn*), that is, God's redeeming dominion, is analogous to a human master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.[19] So begins a parable that has proved difficult to understand given its wide and diverse explanations, uses, and abuses. Verse 1 provides smooth transition from the question about reward and the epigrammatic saying about the first and

the last (19:27-30) with the explanatory "for" (*gar*), confirming that Jesus' parable of the Generous Vineyard Owner develops progression in his response to Peter's query (19:27).

Also worthy of brief notice is the adjectival use of *anthrōpos*, a *human* master of the house. Here, as in many places throughout the New Testament, translators regularly fail to account for *anthrōpos* as an adjective in Jesus' parables when he sketches heaven's reign with analogies to things human as in *human sower* (13:24), *human enemy* (13:28), *human merchant* (13:44), *human master of a house* (13:52; 20:1), and *human king* (18:23; 22:2).[20] Inexplicably, even the TNIV disappoints, not accounting for *anthrōpos* at all.[21] Likewise, when exegetes overlook Matthew's adjectival use of *anthrōpos* they more easily drift to misconstrue the parable as commenting upon earthly sociopolitical matters rather than portraying heavenly things.[22] For example, Pablo Jiménez reifies the protracted imagery by claiming, "The main topic of the parable of the laborers of the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16) is God's attitude toward the poor. The divine attitude would be depicted by the landowner's merciful treatment of the laborers (v. 10)."[23]

By telling the vineyard parable Jesus offers no commentary upon human contractual work relationships of his day, whether they are just or unjust.[24] Rather, Jesus draws a point of vertical analogy from what is human to teach what is divine by formulating an image of an earthly employment situation to teach how God, in his redeeming dominion, distributes his kingdom's reward (*misthos*, 20:8).[25] Locate and understand the human-divine analogy that Jesus draws and one discerns the meaning of the parable. Keep in mind, however, that Jesus' analogical stories (parables) entail both similarity and dissimilarity between things human or earthly and things divine. Atypical or unexpected features may accent dissimilarity.

Unexpected Features in the Earthly Story

Jesus' human story entails an owner of a house who is faced with the need of day laborers to tend his vineyard, presumably to harvest grapes. Early in the morning, at dawn, he goes to the marketplace in the village to hire workers. He and the laborers agree upon a denarius for the day's wage.[26] Without any stated reason other than to hire more laborers, at three-hour intervals throughout the day he returns to the marketplace where he finds others standing idle whom he hires at the third, the sixth, and the ninth hours. Finally, he returns at the eleventh hour to find still others who are inactive for the whole day. He hires them and sends them to work in his vineyard.

Thus far, Jesus purposefully and deftly tells a credible story with only semi-inconspicuous atypical elements in the parable, such as the lateness of hiring some of the laborers, perhaps those hired at the ninth hour but especially those hired an hour before sunset, and the willingness of laborers hired from the third through the ninth hours to trust the owner to give them "whatever is right" without agreeing upon a set wage and no mention of any wage for those hired last.[27]

The greatest unexpected feature of the parable correlates with the epigrammatic and chiastic inclusio that envelops the parable, and Matthew actually inverts the aphorism itself to accentuate the featured element of surprise within the parable—"Thus, the last shall be first and the first last" (20:16; cf. 19:30). This atypical element of the parable comes at the end of the day when the laborers are to be paid. Instead of paying the workers in the order of their being beckoned from the marketplace and sent to the vineyard, the owner instructs his foreman to give the workers the wage in inverse order, giving one denarius to each worker, beginning with the last and progressing to the first hired. Once those who began work at dawn see that the workers hired an hour before sunset receive a denarius, they expect more but receive the same, the amount agreed upon at the

beginning of the day.

Interpreting the parable as having a single point, featuring God's graciousness, as the parable is regularly interpreted, encounters difficulty when considering the inverse order of pay that figures prominently in the parable. Thus, some exegetes dispute that the parable's inverse order of pay features God's generosity or his equity. Lebacqz would rewrite the parable: "If the parable were meant to focus on the generosity of the landowner, it would be told in a different order: those who were hired first would be paid first. Seeing them receive a denarius, those hired last would expect to receive about a tenth of a denarius."[28] From a different angle, challenging the claim that the parable teaches both God's justice and generosity, Derrett contends, "It is usually thought that this parable teaches God's 'behaviour' by a picture utterly unlike human behavior: if this were true it would run contrary to almost every other parable…. On the contrary the story is as as [sic] lifelike as it is amusing."[29]

Even though Lebacqz and Derrett appeal to valid reasons for not accepting at face value the traditional single-point understanding of the parable, both engage in exercises in missing the fuller point of the parable. Both inadequately take note of the divergent or unexpected features of the parable. Thus, both domesticate the parable. For example, Derrett tames the unexpected features of the parable in his effort to make it lifelike by relying upon the Talmud for minimum wage regulations and by assuming conditions that the parable neither states nor implies.[30]

Efforts to domesticate these unexpected features derive from hearing without adequate discernment. Jesus' purpose is not socio-political. He is not overturning human employment practices by imposing a new ethic to govern hiring contracts so that all workers should receive the same pay for unequal duration of labor. Jesus' parable is an earthly story that figuratively portrays things heavenly, not earthly.

Criticisms of the parable's design misses the fact that Jesus purposefully stretches human imagination as Huffman rightly observes, "Jesus deliberately and cleverly led the listeners along by degrees until they understood that if God's generosity was to be represented by a man, such a man would be different from any man ever encountered."[31] Yet, even Huffman's observation does not sufficiently account for the fullness of the atypical features of the parable. It seems that the point of Jesus' parable is not adequately encompassed by exegetes who identify a singular point from this multiple point parable. Yes, the parable teaches that God's giving of the kingdom of heaven does not take into account any human merit for the whole dispensing is of his grace that is free from external constraints.[32] Yet, the staging of the parable yields meaning that is more complex than this.

Here is the genius of Jesus' parable. He devises a story that intentionally stretches credibility by depicting a "generous" man who hires day laborers whose plan unfolds and becomes evident only after one has heard the whole parable.[33] Consider the exquisite progression of the parable. The generous man's plan entails (1) not only repeated appearances but even an unexpected and very late appearance at the marketplace to contract workers to work for an hour, (2) specifying agreed upon payment only for the first laborers contracted but keeping open payment schedules for laborers later employed, (3) transgressing ordinary human affairs by inverting the order of distributing the wage from last to first hired while the first hired watch and wait expectantly, (4) distributing the same wage to everyone equally without distinction, (5) purposefully devising a plan to provoke to jealousy the expectant first hired workers, in order that (6) he could feature both his equity and generosity by (7) giving the identical reward to all indivisibly thus banishing jealousy.

The generous vineyard owner's atypical order of pay, bringing the last hired to the front of the line and sending the first to the back of the line to watch with expectancy until they would receive their wage, and atypical generosity in dispens-

ing the same wage of a denarius to all the later hired workers incites the first employed workers to grumble, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." The owner's reply underscores (1) the justice of his action, (2) the fact that he kept the contract he had made at the beginning of the day, (3) that he does not banish the first hired workers and turn them away empty-handed, (4) his generosity to give to those last hired even as to those first hired, (5) his rightful authority to do with his possessions as he desires, and (6) the jealousy of the first laborers to guard their perceived advantage or superiority over the other workers juxtaposed with his own generosity.[34]

The stress of the parable's end falls upon this interaction between the vineyard owner and the workers first contracted.[35] From this interaction it seems evident that distribution of the equal reward reveals both the owner's equity with generosity and the first laborers' jealousy to safeguard recognition of longevity of service over brevity in the vineyard. This complicates discernment of the parable's meaning.

The Meaning of the Earthly Story

Contrary to efforts to uncover the original context where Jesus first spoke this vineyard parable, as though that were possible given that Matthew's Gospel alone narrates the parable, it is incumbent upon exegetes to acknowledge that placement of the parable obligates one to understand the parable within the narrative of the First Gospel not within an unknown context. Unlike Mark and Luke, Matthew includes the parable. The exegete's task, then, is to determine its significance and meaning within the flow of the narrative.

First, determining what Matthew most likely wrote is reasonable and necessary, given the divergent testimony of Greek manuscripts concerning 20:16. Modern translations reflect the assessment of scholars that the second proverbial expression as read in the KJV and ASV—"for many be called but few are chosen"—is likely not original but an interpolation by assimilation to Matt 22:14.[36] Like Mark, Matthew's account concerning Jesus' encounter with the Rich Young Ruler followed by Peter's inquisitive reminder—"Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will there be for us?" (Matt 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-28)—includes Jesus' proverb, "But many who are first will be last, and last ones first" (Matt 19:30; Mark 10:31).[37] Following these words, Matthew's Gospel alone includes the Generous Vineyard Owner (Matt 20:1-16) standing between Jesus' two proverbial statements, the second presented as the inverse of the former. It is worth noting that the epigrammatic saying of 19:30 which is chiastic—"Many first ones will be last, and last ones first"—becomes an inverted chiasm in 20:16—"In this manner, the last shall be first and the first last" (20:16).

As stated earlier, this placement of the parable, enveloped within these two statements of the same chiastic epigram presented in an inverted chiastic arrangement, accentuates the primary unexpected or atypical feature of the parable, namely, the inverted distribution of equal reward, beginning with the last hired and moving to the first employed. Add to this the fact that the adverb (*houtōs*), "in this manner," introduces the inverted bracketing epigram, it is difficult to avoid the obvious, that the enclosing proverb, particularly with its inversion in 20:16, enforces the point of the parable and that the parable explains, develops, and prepares for the inverted specific proverbial inclusio, "In this manner, the last shall be first and the first last."

Against this, despite observing the relationship between the inclusio and the proverb, C. L. Mitton strangely concludes, "This, however, cannot have been the original meaning of the parable, since in the parable itself there is no reversal of rank or privilege. First and last receive the same payment. The whole point lies in the equality of the reward, not its reversal."[38] Mitton assumes that the bracketing proverb—"The last shall be first and the

first last" (Matt 19:30; 20:16)—requires reversal of rank or privilege, that rich and poor, powerful and weak, prominent and obscure, or great and insignificant will have their ranks reversed, presumably calling for distribution of unequal rewards, the rich will become poor while the poor become rich, etc. Yet, as Mitton acknowledges, "there is in fact no note of rejection … all, even the grumblers, receive the same reward."[39] What if, however, the proverb requires only the kind of inversion that Jesus depicts in the Generous Vineyard Owner, a leveling that dispenses with proportional ranking, and not a reversal that either expels the dawn-hired-laborers empty-handed or that allocates differing or varying rewards to the workers?[40] What if the bracketing aphorisms—"The first shall be last and the last first" and the chiastic inverse "The last shall be first and the first last"—are generalized proverbs that bear slightly different meanings depending upon the referents within their given contextual uses? What if the Generous Vineyard Owner adds a perspective that alters the referent for the epigram in 19:30 to a different referent for the epigram in 20:16?

After all, two of the four uses of the proverb and the *only uses* in Matthew's Gospel envelop the Generous Vineyard Owner (Matt 19:30; 20:16). The other two uses occur in Mark 10:31 and Luke 13:30 with a similar expression in Mark 9:35.[41] Given that Mark 10:31 is parallel to Matt 19:30, it seems reasonable to suppose that the proverb's meaning bears the same sense in both passages.[42] In Luke 13:30 it seems evident that the proverb's referent punctuates the "eschatological reversal" that entails banishment from and admittance to the kingdom.[43] Many of the religious elite who seem to be in the kingdom will at last be excluded, while others, particularly Israel's outcasts including Gentiles who seem excluded, will be admitted.[44]

Matthew places the proverb at the end of Jesus' dialog with the disciples (19:23-29) which comes upon the heels of his exchange with the Rich Young Man concerning inheriting eternal life (19:16-22) and directly before and then immediately following the Generous Vineyard Owner (19:30; 20:16) as an inverted chiastic bracket. Placement of the epigram in 19:30 follows Jesus' responses first to the disciples' question—"Who then is able to be saved?" (19:25)—and then to Peter's inquisitive reminder—"Look, we have left everything and followed you" (19:27). Keeping in mind that the concern is salvation, inheriting eternal life, Jesus says,

> Truly, I tell you that in the regeneration when the Son of Man is seated upon the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit upon twelve thrones and will judge the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or fathers or mothers or children or fields on account of my name, will receive back a hundred times and will inherit eternal life. But many first ones will be last, and last ones first (Matt 19:28-30).

Thus, it seems evident that the epigram of 19:30 entails warning and consolation. Jesus offers consolation to Peter and to all who like him have become poor in this world's goods to follow Messiah. Jesus delivers warning also to those who like the Rich Young Ruler are rich in this world's goods. Many who have all will be last; those who have left all will be first.[45] It is worth noting that the saying in 19:30 is generalized: "*many first ones …*" (*polloi esontai prōtoi eschatoi kai eschatoi prōtoi*). This is in keeping with Jesus' parable concerning the camel passing through the eye of a needle. Not all the rich are excluded from the kingdom of heaven. Some rich ones will be saved because salvation, inheritance of eternal life, is not impossible for the wealthy, for "with God all things are possible" (19:26).

Placement of the proverbial saying in Matt 20:16, however, suggests that a different referent may be in view than that in 19:30 (cf. Mark 10:31) and in Luke 13:30 where *some first ones* are banished from the kingdom ("Depart from me all you doers of unrighteousness" [Luke 13:27]).[46] This is

so for two reasons.

First, the parable itself in Matt 20:8 seems to provide the explicit referent by stating, "Call the workers and give to them the wage, beginning from the last until the first" (20:8). The parable calls for inversion of and specificity of the referent in the proverb. The parable, as will be shown more clearly later, does not depict *banishment of individuals* from the kingdom but rather *banishment of rank and status* from the kingdom by the equal gracious reward given to all alike regardless how much one abandons in devotion to the kingdom depicted by varied starting times of activity in the vineyard.

Second, use of the proverbial saying in 20:16 bears two indicators that specify its referent to be different from the referent that the saying bears in 19:30. The adverb "thus" or "in this manner" (*houōs*) draws the linkage between the parable and the proverbial saying in 20:16. The epigram expresses a fitting conclusion to the parable. Additionally, unlike in 19:30, the saying in 20:16 does not generalize but specifically identifies "the last ones" and "the first ones" with substantive adjectives including articles (*hoi eschatoi; hoi prōtoi*). The epigrammatic saying altered from 19:30 signals its different application. In 20:16, then, "the first ones" (*hoi prōtoi*) does not seem to bear the same referent as "many first ones" (*polloi prōtoi*) bears in 19:30, referring to "many rich." In 20:16 the referent is to those individuals who are figuratively represented by the first workers hired by the generous vineyard owner. Whom do they represent, (1) Jews, (2) Scribes and Pharisees, as traditionally understood, or (3) the Twelve?

The Message of the Earthly Story

Identifying the persons figuratively portrayed as hired at different intervals in Jesus' parable, but especially the first and the last workers, has proved to be no small task. Irenaeus took the good owner's frequenting the marketplace to hire workers at five intervals as representing five distinguishable periods of redemptive history beginning with Adam and climaxing in Christ. Origen regarded the five intervals as various stages of life when individuals may come to faith in Christ. Still others have identified the first workers with the Jews and the last with Gentile believers.[47]

Modern scholars reject these proposals as allegorization. Though Irenaeus's approach exceeds the parable's intent, Origen's instincts seem close to the mark. The varied work start times may partially signify that Christ's disciples come to repentance at different times in their lives. Given the flow of the narrative (Matt 19:16-20:16), the different hiring times seem likely to signify the varied calling of Christ's disciples which includes variations concerning how much they are called to forsake in order to follow him faithfully.[48] Even though the hiring of laborers at the third, sixth, and ninth hours is hardly the key to interpreting the parable, surely their mention is more than mere drapery to the story. Their inclusion is crucial to provide credibility concerning both the reasonable heightened expectation on the part of the earliest employed laborers as they wait for their pay and the understandable though inexcusable complaint of unfairness they exhibit upon receipt of the identical pay as all the other workers receive who sustain fewer hours of intensive labor.

Exegetes are right to make the case that the parable teaches God's generosity and mercy.[49] Yet, criticisms of this traditional interpretation that the parable's main point is to banish every imagination of meriting entrance into the kingdom of heaven raise valid observations.[50] If God's graciousness were the *whole point* of the parable, the conclusion would seem not only extraneous but also distracting if not confusing. If God's graciousness were the sole point, would not payment of the laborers in the order of their being hired while requiring them to remain until all are paid put greater stress upon the disproportionate and generous reward given to those last hired? If, Jesus designs the parable *simply* to overthrow all notions that the reward of eternal life is received by merit, why does he present a parable in which

humans enter into an agreement to work in the vineyard for a day to receive a denarius as the reward (*misthos*)? Nevertheless, as shown earlier, those who criticize the traditional interpretation tend not to recognize either that Jesus' parable does entail elements that feature God's graciousness or that he fashions the story to accomplish more than make this singular point. What, more than God's graciousness, does this earthly story feature?[51]

To understand the fuller message of this parable, it is necessary to pose a series of questions that exegetes regularly fail to raise, it seems, because so many tend to restrict meaning of a parable to only a single point.[52] Why does Jesus stage his parable as he does? In his parable of the kingdom of heaven, why does he present workers in a vineyard agreeing to receive a wage for their labors, if his gospel does not teach that one merits eternal life? Why does he figuratively represent God with the *atypically generous man* who throughout the whole day contracts more hires whom he sends to work in his vineyard? Then, why does Jesus introduce another unexpected feature but this time with a twist when he portrays this *atypically generous man* as purposefully provoking the first laborers hired to object to his generosity which renders the later workers their equals by his inverting distribution of the equal reward requiring them to remain until last as they wait expectantly for a larger sum while watching as the other workers receive a full denarius, their own agreed upon wage set at dawn? To be sure, reception of the same reward by the eleventh-hour laborers features the good vineyard owner's generosity. Yet, because Jesus gives his parable this unexpected twist he diverts attention away from the last workers hired to the first and to their sense of inequity triggered by the generous equal pay given to all, there must be something more that this parable conveys than God's generosity.

As shown early in this essay, it is paramount that we understand that Jesus' parables are earthly analogies of heavenly things. The heavenly things themselves bear both similarities and dissimilarities to the earthly analogies Jesus sketches with his parables. The parables themselves restrict the analogous features so that only those whose hearing and vision are impaired will insist upon literalizing the various aspects of Jesus' stories, thus brutalizing his parables to their own harm.

As avowed earlier, Jesus' staging of his story with atypical and unexpected features points us to the message of the parable. Consider these features.

(1) Doubtless the generous vineyard owner figuratively represents God. Why does Jesus have this same *good* vineyard owner invert the order of pay inciting those first contracted for one denarius for a day's labor to complain about equity? Why would a *good man* deliberately strain the human sense of justice for some by lavishing generosity upon others? Why would Jesus include such an element concerning a man who represents God? Why does Jesus tell parables with unexpected twists? One could ask why Jesus presents himself analogous to one who breaks into a strong man's house to plunder his property after tying up the strong man (Matt 12:29). Or, one could ask why Jesus portrays himself as a thief who comes unexpectedly at night (Matt 24:43-44). Is Jesus a thief? Clearly Jesus embeds unexpected twists and turns into his parables to arrest attention to the message he conveys through his stories not that every feature finds tit-for-tat correspondence to the heavenly kingdom.[53]

(2) Ponder the unusual order of distributing the identical and impartial wage (*misthos*). He inverts the order of pay by sending to the back those who expected to be at the front of the line to receive their agreed upon wage, and he brings to the front those who expected to be at the back. So the first hired sent to the back of the line now watch expectantly, anticipating a wage larger than agreed upon at dawn, given the owner's generosity. The sameness of the wage for all, regardless of longevity in the vineyard, signals that the reward (*misthos*) figuratively depicts eternal life,

which the Rich Young Ruler expressed a desire to inherit. Jesus figuratively represents the equal giving of salvation, the salvation about which the disciples inquired when they asked, "Who, then, is able to be saved?" (Matt 19:25).[54]

(3) Reflect on the owner's unexpected generosity as he dispenses the identical wage to all his workers, including those hired an hour before sunset. The sameness of the wage eliminates the notion that Jesus' parable teaches that eternal life is merited. What a strange merit system this would be, for regardless of labors expended no one earns either more or less than another. God's gift is lavish and right, for he who gives generously will never be anyone's debtor, because he who gives justly always gives more than anyone deserves.

(4) Consider, therefore, the irony of the protest offered by the first employed workers when the owner's equity incites their complaint of inequity: "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." The lavish reward for those who labored less provokes the objection erupting from the first-hour laborers' sense of inequity. This feature of the parable calls upon Jesus' disciples to assess "how far their sympathetic reactions are still governed by human ideals" of proportional reward "rather than God's uncalculating generosity."[55]

(5) Again, following their protestation of being rendered equal with the later employees, examine the dialog that ensues between the first workers hired and the owner of the vineyard. The owner is right to defend himself, "Friend, I am doing you no injustice."[56] After all, the first laborers can only nod affirmatively when the owner asks, "Did you not agree with me upon a denarius?" It is noteworthy that the owner of the vineyard neither removes the denarius from those who express jealousy, signifying loss of eternal life, nor banishes them to punishment, signifying expulsion from the kingdom. Instead, he says, "Take what is yours and go. I desire to give to this last one even as to you." Is Jesus teaching, therefore, that the kingdom of heaven will provide sanctuary for people who demand exacting proportional reward and grumble with envious protection of privilege for themselves because salvation is equally given to all without discrimination? Surely he is not. Rather, the design of the parable is to dispel such notions from disciples *now*, for the reward will be all of grace.

(6) It now becomes evident that by telling his parable, Jesus reinforces his response to Peter's query when he inquires, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will there be for us?" (Matt 19:27). Jesus responds to Peter not by rebuking but by assuring the disciples that their inheritance will be extravagantly disproportionate to what they have left behind to follow Christ, for they will receive back a hundredfold of all they have left on account of Christ and they will inherit eternal life in the age to come. The inheritance received equally by all suffices lavishly. The dialog with Peter triggered by Jesus' comments following the exchange with the Rich Young Ruler is the backdrop against which Jesus tells his parable to dispel any lingering sense that equal inheritance of such lavish recompense may constitute inequity for disciples who abandon much to follow Christ.

In the Last Day, in keeping with the promise of eternal life, Jesus proclaims in the gospel of the kingdom, God will give the reward of eternal life alike to everyone who enters the kingdom.[57] Receipt of the reward by those who enter late features the *disproportional lavishness* of God's gift of eternal life in his kingdom while receipt of the reward by those who enter early features the *indisputable justice* of God's gift of eternal life within his dominion. He gives the salvation he promises. The first-hour workers no less than those who worked one hour within this vineyard parable figuratively represent individuals who have entered into the kingdom of heaven who will at last also inherit the life of the kingdom, the eternal life about which the rich young ruler inquired. No one receives less than what is right, and all

receive more than deserved. No one is cheated, for God's lavish gift of eternal life will never wane by being distributed. Early or late entrance into the kingdom does not enlarge or reduce the reward to be inherited in the Last Day, for God's gift is lavish, disproportionate to human labors, and just.

The parable serves as a warning to banish now every vain notion that would protect supposed privilege because of how much one has forsaken on account of the kingdom. Its purpose is not to provide an advanced pictorial preview of the Last Day with some disciples actually grumbling in that Day against God's equity and lavish generosity but yet awarded eternal life. In that Day there will be no room for privilege and rank, for anyone who has ears to hear will take heed that the rightness and lavishness of God now and evermore banishes every imagination that he will give the reward of eternal life with proportionality either to longevity in the kingdom or to how much one abandons to follow Christ.[58]

CONCLUSION

Inheriting eternal life comes by way of radical devotion to Christ that, for some, such as the Rich Young Ruler, requires forsaking all one's earthly goods to follow Christ (Matt 19:16ff). Accordingly, when Jesus speaks of wealth blocking the entrance into the kingdom and offers the saying concerning the camel passing through the eye of a needle, the Twelve respond, "Who, then, is able to be saved?" (19:25). Jesus' response—"With humans this is impossible, but with God all things are possible"(19:26)—grounds hope for Peter who asks the question on behalf of his fellow disciples, "Look, we have left everything and followed you" (19:27), and receives assurance that everyone who forsakes all earthly things for Christ's sake will receive back one hundredfold and eternal life. Jesus teaches his followers to regard eternal life as a *prospective gift or reward of incentive*, not as *retrospective wages earned or merited*.

Jesus offers the proverbial saying—"But many who are first will be last, and last ones first" (19:30)—to contrast the presumed destinies of individuals based on appearances in the present age. The saying provides smooth segue to the Generous Vineyard Owner given as a fuller response to Peter's question to chasten any lingering misconception concerning reward in the kingdom.

So, within Matthew's narrative the Generous Vineyard Owner connects back through the proverbial saying of 19:30 with Jesus' call for selfless sacrifice in order to inherit eternal life, explicitly present in his exchange with the rich ruler (19:16-21) and in his dialog with his disciples (19:22-30), especially once Peter offers his inquiry, speaking for the Twelve. Thus, the traditional interpretation of the parable is on track even if it stops short of the parable's full meaning when exegetes and commentators contend that the parable portrays God as gracious and merciful who gives eternal life without merit.

Yet, the second half of the parable is both unnecessary and confusing, if Jesus designed the parable simply to present God's gift as gracious and unmerited. Therefore, exegetes who see multiple points being presented in this parable are more fully on target.

The parable does not present a singular point but features a cluster of three primary points: (1) the *extravagance* of God's gift of salvation that knows no reduction in its dispensing; (2) the *equality* of God's singular and indivisible reward of eternal life; and (3) the *equity* of God's equal and extravagant reward of life to all his people. Indeed, eternal life to be inherited in the Last Day will be *lavishly given* not earned. God will distribute to all his people in the age to come the indivisible gift of eternal life *identically* not proportionally either to how long one is active in the kingdom or to how much one forsakes on account of Christ in this present age. God's awarding salvation in that Day will be *just*, for no one will be cheated or treated unfairly because God's lavish reward does not deplete with distribution.

Thus, the parable banishes as vain any notion that proximity to Christ, early entrance into the kingdom, or how much one forsakes on account of Christ will result in ranking at the head of the line at the judgment. The reward of eternal life to be inherited in the Last Day is God's lavish gift, unmerited, indivisible, and just, that he will distribute equally to every follower of Christ and dispense without measure, without depleting the reservoir of his reward so that whether last or first all receive the same lavish gift, and God does this without becoming indebted to anyone.[59]

ENDNOTES

[1]Cf. Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 4-7.

[2]C. L. Mitton observes, "In the first edition of his book on 'The Parables of Jesus' Jeremias called this parable by its conventional title: 'The Workers in the Vineyard'. In the 1963 English Edition, however, he changed it to 'The Good Employer', and that places the emphasis where it belongs" ("Expounding the Parables: VII. The Workers in the Vineyard [Matthew 20:1-16]," *The Expository Times* 77 [1966]: 309).

3 Erich H. Kiehl ("Why Jesus Spoke in Parables," *Concordia Journal* 16 [1990]: 245-57) does much to perpetuate this mistaken notion concerning why Jesus taught with parables. Kiehl states,

> The Gospels do not record Jesus speaking parables in the usual meaning of the term in the earlier part of His ministry. But later on, during His great Galilean ministry, because of His hearers' false view of the Messiah, Jesus began to speak in parables. In so doing, He tried in this way to get them to think and ponder what He was actually telling them. . . .
>
> Since Jesus' hearers would not listen to Him on His terms, that is, the true meaning of the kingdom of God as revealed in Scripture, Jesus then began to speak in parables. His hearers had an innate love for graphic stories and pictorial speech. Jesus used this appealing parabolic approach to catch their attention and to seek to get them to ponder the true meaning of what He said (246, 259).

[4]For categorization of Jesus' parables see Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 9-15.

[5]"You will indeed hear and not understand, and you will indeed see and not perceive. For the heart of this people has become calloused, and with their ears they barely hear, and their eyes they have shut, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and they turn and I heal them" (Matt 13:14, 15; cited from Isa 6:9, 10).

[6]On Matthew's use of Psalm 78:2 to explain Jesus' teaching the crowds in parables, D. A. Carson is particularly instructive. See D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (vol. 8; ed. Frank E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 320-23. As the psalmist brings together well known "things from of old" but in such a manner as to disclose things that have been concealed or hidden, enigmatic, and riddle like, laying the Lord's righteous acts of redemption alongside Israel's privilege and rebellion, so Jesus teaches in parables things formerly hidden. Clearly, "things formerly hidden" no longer remain concealed as formerly because Jesus now reveals them, albeit in parables that sustain a certain quality of concealment in Jesus' revealment. Surely, as Carson points out, Jesus does not reveal things that have formerly been hidden so that they will remain hidden. Yet, as Jesus teaches in parables the very act of revealing entails some measure of concealing as made evident by Matt 13:11-14. "Taken as a whole, Jesus' parables preserve the expectation of the apocalyptic coming of Messiah. They also introduce a new pattern of an inaugurated kingdom that anticipates the Parousia. Moreover this pattern rests on Jesus' self-understanding as the Messiah who unites in himself streams of revelation from the old covenant that had not been so clearly united before" (322).

[7]See ibid., 322-23.

[8]Of the three Synoptic Gospels, Mark emphatically underscores the feature of hearing by bracketing

Jesus' telling of the parable with the words, "Listen.... Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear" (4:3, 9).

[9]Simply because the proverbial statement of Matt 13:12—"For whoever has to him will be given even more; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him"—is found with slight variation elsewhere (Matt 25:29; Mark 4:25), is no reason to assume that it is to be read as generalized here. Given use of the same verbs in 13:11 (*humīn dedotai gnōnai ta mystēria*) it is more likely that 13:12 refers to the *giving of knowing, discerning.*

[10]Howard L. Parsons, "The Commitments of Jesus and Marx: Resources for the Challenge and Necessity of Cooperation," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 23 (1985): 467.

[11]Ibid., 462. Parsons claims that Jesus strives for a society that "is similar to Marx's 'higher stage' of communism in which the rule is: 'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.'" In a somewhat less overt manner, Robert Fortna advances the notion that the parable rebukes economic inequities. "In opposing social evil, the church must address its root economic cause. And what is called for is no economic program, no simple espousal of a Marxist system, but rather a Marxian dethroning of the reigning economic ideology. In this respect Marx and Jesus are in agreement" ("Exegesis and Proclamation: 'You have made them equal to us!' [Mt 20:1-16]," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 72 [1990]: 70-71).

[12]See Philip Culbertson, "Reclaiming the Matthean Vineyard Parables," *Encounter* 49 (1988): 264. Culbertson assails William Barclay as "blatantly anti-Semitic" (265).

[13]Ibid., 267.

[14]Ibid., 265. Culbertson reasons, "The Nimshal [the point of the parable] unquestionably has no relation to the Mashal [the parable story], for the Mashal is not about the reversal of fortunes; it is rather a Mashal about the equality of all creatures, and about God's autonomy in rewarding obedience.... In no instance ... is there a suggestion that an appropriate Nimshal might be "the last will be first and the first last." With the Nimshal removed, the parable makes complete sense as spoken by a Jew to a Second Temple Jewish audience, about their responsibilities within the Vineyard, the House of Israel, and about God's generous providence."

[15]See, e.g., J. Duncan Derrett, "Workers in the Vineyard: A Parable of Jesus," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 25 (1974): 64-91.

[16]For example, see Fortna ("Exegesis and Proclamation," 66) who states, "The parable itself extends only through v. 15. The moral that follows in v. 16 ('Therefore, the last will be first and the first last') is hardly original; rather, it collides with the thrust of the story ('You have made them equal to us'—v. 12b). Its addition by 'Matthew'—or possibly someone earlier in the process of handing on the oral tradition stemming from Jesus—seems to have been occasioned by its superficial parallel to the relatively incidental phrase in the story, 'beginning with the last up to the first' (8c). The saying is found elsewhere as an independent logion of Jesus (Mk 10:31, Lk 13:30); in Mt it appears immediately before this story (19:30) so as, with v. 16, to frame it."

[17]In Matt 20:16 the King James Version reflects a longer reading with the inclusion of a second proverbial statement, "for many be called but few are chosen." Modern translations accept the shorter reading and do not include the longer. If the longer reading was original scribes may have dropped it by homeoteleuton, the repetition of endings. It is equally plausible to explain the inclusion of the additional words by assimilation to Matt 22:14.

[18]Snodgrass's reasoning seems circuitous: "Although v. 16 begins with *houtōs* ('thus'), I do not think it is intended to be the *nimshal* of the parable [the point or message of the parable]. It is, rather, placed here as a reminder of the point that dominates 19:13-20:34. *Gar* ('for') in 20:1 shows that Matthew saw the parable as in some way an example of the proverb, which indicates that human perceptions on ranking are without significance and will be stood on their heads in the kingdom, which is indeed the message of the parable" (*Stories with Intent*, 371-72).

[19]On expressions such as *homoia estin*, see D. A. Carson, "The OMOIOΣ Word-Group as Introduction to Some Matthean Parables," *New Testament Studies*

31 (1985): 277. He points out that the usual translation—"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed"—does not draw the analogy out sufficiently. Instead, he proposes translating, "The kingdom of heaven is like the case of a man who sows etc."

[20]Modern translations do not translate *anthrōpō* in Matt 20:1. The KJV translated, "the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man *that is* an householder" (likewise the ASV). Matt 13:24 (*anthōpō speiranti*), 28 (*echthros anthrōpos*), 44 (*anthōpō emporō*), 52 (*anthōpō oikodespotē*); 18:23 (*anthrōpō basilei*); 20:1 (*anthōpō oikodespotē*); 22:2 (*anthrōpō basilei*).

[21]The TNIV translates Matt 20:1, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning."

[22]For example, see William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 79-97. Herzog argues that Jesus' parable addresses abuse of peasants by wealthy landowners. For a brief critique of Herzog's proposal, see Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 372-73. Snodgrass observes, "Herzog's approach is an example of one laying the culture over the text, rather than letting the text lie in its culture, and then bending the text to one's own ideology" (373).

[23]"The Laborers of the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16): A Hispanic Homiletical Reading," *Journal for Preachers* 21 (1997): 38. Characteristic of many exegetes, Jiménez imposes onto the text things that Jesus neither mentions nor assumes. So, Jiménez claims, "The landowner … pays all the workers 'the usual daily wage' (v. 2), knowing that they needed at least that amount to take care of their families. The understandable complaint of the laborers who toiled all day long exemplifies the attitude of those who judge according to the prevalent social values (vv. 9-15)" (38). Evidently Jiménez believes that human employers who pay human workers proportionally to work expended do injustice. He concludes that a sermon on the parable would make the main topic "God's love for the poor" and would "stress God's love for all Hispanics—particularly for those who can be seen in cities like Austin and Los Angeles waiting by the street to be hired. It would also describe the clash between the values of human sociopolitical systems and the values of God's reign" (39). Jiménez consciously rejects the caution Joachim Jeremias issues, "Why did Jesus tell the parable? Was it his object to extol God's mercy to the poor? If that were so he might have omitted the second part of the parable (v 11ff)" (*The Parables of Jesus* [London: SCM, 1954], 27).

[24]John Dominic Crossan misses the parable's meaning by contending that the point is neither justice nor mercy but simply that the kingdom of heaven will be unexpected (*In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* [New York: Harper & Row, 1973], 114-15).

[25]Characteristic of those who reject the Christian church's understanding of the parable as presenting salvation under the imagery of an indivisible reward disproportionate to labors expended is Karen Lebacqz, "Justice, Economics, and the Uncomfortable Kingdom: Reflections on Matthew 20:1-16," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1983): 31-32. Lebacqz concludes, "[F]or me, this parable addresses the way we interpret the world and develop expectations. What do we do when our calculations are wrong and our expectations are disappointed?" (38-39).

[26]Whether a denarius was a fair wage (so Derrett, "Workers in the Vineyard," 68) or a generous wage (so Eta Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus: Introduction and Exposition* [London: SPCK, 1966], 68) is inconsequential, for those hired last a denarius was certainly a generous wage, given the fact that the dawn-hired-laborers agreed to one denarius, obviously what they deemed equitable.

[27]For many exegetes the vineyard owner's repeated returns to the marketplace to hire more laborers, but especially the later hires, indicates that it was the day before the Sabbath when the grapes were at their peak to be harvested (e.g., Derrett, "Workers in the Vineyard," 71-72). This is utterly extraneous to Jesus' parable.

[28]Lebacqz, "Justice, Economics, and the Uncomfortable Kingdom," 34.

[29]Derrett, "Workers in the Vineyard," 71.

[30]Norman A. Huffman ably shows that we have no

assurance that paying a minimum wage was in force at the time of Jesus and that Derrett's reconstruction of the parable is just that, his own story more than Jesus' story ("Atypical Features in the Parables," *Journal of Biblical Literature* [1978]: 209-10).

[31]Ibid., 209.

[32]H. A. W. Meyer expresses this point of departure from earlier exegetes. He states, "The proposition: 'that in dispensing the blessings of the kingdom of heaven, God takes no account of human merit, but that all is the result of His own free grace … does not constitute the *leading thought* set forth in the parable, though, no doubt, it may be supposed to *underlie* it." (*Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Gospel of Matthew* [trans. Peter Christie; New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884], 352). Meyer's reasons for his statement are less persuasive than his insightful observation.

[33]As indicated earlier, use of "Is your eye jealous because I am *good*?" is a catchword linking the parable to the narrative concerning The Rich Young Man who inquired, "Teacher, what *good thing* must I do in order that I might have eternal life?" and Jesus responded, "Why do you inquire concerning *the good thing*? Only one is *the Good One*" (Matt 19:17, 18).

[34]The expression within the question, "Is *your eye evil*" (*ho ophthalmos sou ponēros*) occurs also in Matt 6:23. It is an idiom referring to jealousy. For the idiom, see also Deut 15:9; 1 Sam 18:9. Given the idiomatic expression for jealousy in Matt 20:15, the *goodness* of the vineyard owner bears the sense of "generous." See also note 1 above.

[35]Cf. Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 127. Stein, however, seems to overstate his case when he rejects the interpretation "that Jesus in the parable seeks to demonstrate that salvation is by grace alone. This interpretation has had a continual succession of proponents since the time of Luther. Yet not only does this look like a reading of this basic Reformation issue into the parable, it is refuted by the fact that the first workers clearly earned their denarius or 'salvation.' Are we to conclude that some people are saved by grace alone (eleventh hour); some people completely earn their salvation on an agreed-upon basis (first workers); and others obtain their salvation by various combinations of works and grace (third, sixth, and night hours)? This is clearly not a correct interpretation of the parable" (127). Stein seems to sense his exaggeration for he adds a note: "Since I have said that the parable does not teach the doctrine of 'justification by faith,' it nevertheless must be observed that it does teach the graciousness and mercy of God which is one of the essential foundations upon which the doctrine of justification by faith is built" (165, n. 38).

[36]See note 17 above.

[37]Luke's account has Peter claiming, "Look, we have left behind homes to follow you" (Luke 18:28).

[38]Mitton, "Expounding the Parables," 308. Mitton adds, "Moreover, it is clear that the choice of context is Matthew's. He introduces into a Markan context a piece of material which he apparently knew as an independent unit, without any context, and places it where he thinks its meaning will fit most appropriately." If one grants Mitton's assumptions, then his conclusions are clear.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Craig L. Blomberg observes, "Surely J. B. Bauer is correct to stress that the parable teaches not the reversal of order but the abandonment of every form of ordering. All is based on mercy" (*Interpreting the Parables* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990], 222. Blomberg refers to J. B. Bauer, "Gnadenlohn oder Tageslohn (Mt 20,8-16)," *Biblica* 42 (1961), 224-28.

[41]The epigram in Mark 9:35—"If someone wishes to be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." R. T. France proposes that use of the proverb in Mark 10:31 is a gentle rebuke to Peter rather than referring to "those like the rich young man, whose comfortable situation in life might make them seem first" (*The Gospel of Mark* [New International Commentary on the Greek Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002]), 408.

[42]On Mark 10:31 see James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 317. Com-

menting upon the chiastic saying, Edwards notes, "Its simplicity captures a profound irony of discipleship. The kingdom of God topples our cherished priorities and demands new ones. It takes from those who follow Jesus things they would keep, and gives to them things they could not imagine. Those who take their stand on the riches—whatever they be—will have nothing to stand on. Those who give up everything—not only possessions but even people and places, indeed their own lives (8:35)—to follow Jesus will not simply be compensated for their sacrifices but surfeited a hundred times over with the same, and in the world to come with eternal life."

[43]Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (2 vols.; Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2:1240. Bock offers a comment on Matt 20:16 which suggests that in his mind he conflated the Generous Vineyard Owner with the Tenants of the Vineyard in Matt 21:33-46. He states, "Matt. 20:16 deals with the taking of the kingdom from the vineyard keepers in order to give it to another, a point similar to Luke's" (n. 20).

[44]Cf. I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (New International Commentary on the Greek Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 568. See also Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 380. Stein observes, "The lack of the article before 'last' and 'first' indicates that neither all the last nor all the first would experience this reversal. Some Jews . . . did believe. The saying contrasts not all the last and all the first but 'last ones' kinds of people and 'first ones' kinds of people."

[45]Cf. Alan P.1 Stanley, *Did Jesus Teach Salvation by Works? The Role of Works in Salvation in the Synoptic Gospels* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006), 193. On Matt 19:30, Stanley observes, "The saying is somewhat ambiguous but seems to summarize the irony of the situation with general application. The Rich Young Ruler who had everything appeared to be first and the disciples who had left everything appeared to be last. However the reverse is in fact true. The last *will* be first and the first *will* be last."

[46]Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 751. France observes, "This parable, unlike that of 21:28-32, does not depict people outside the kingdom of heaven, those for whom there is no reward at all. It is about equality among disciples rather than about insiders and outsiders." (n. 22).

[47]Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 399.

[48]Cf. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 224.

[49]John Calvin appeals to this parable as he explains, "But lest we should think that the reward the Lord promises us is reduced to a matter of merit, he has set forth a parable." He quotes Pseudo-Ambrose (*The Call of the Gentiles*) who interprets the parable and concludes, "For he does not pay the price of their labor but showers the riches of his goodness upon those whom he has chosen apart from works. Thus they also … who sweated in much labor, and did not receive more than the latecomers, should understand that they received a gift of grace, not the reward for their works" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* [trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960], 3.18.3).

[50]The traditional understanding of the parable since the Reformation receives modern expression by Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (trans. by Irene and Fraser McLuskey; New York: Harper & Row, 1960; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). Bornkamm states, "The idea of the merit of good works and man's claim upon God is most clearly shaken and abolished in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Mt. xx.1-16).... Thus the idea of reward has received a completely new meaning. Detached from deeds of merit and the claims of man, it has become an expression of divine justice and grace, to which man is directed, now more than ever called to effort and faithfulness, and on which he must lean" (142-43).

[51]Blomberg categorizes this parable among "complex three-point parables" (*Interpreting the Parables*, 221-25). He identifies the three main points: (1) arrangements with the earlier groups of workers hired portray that none of God's people will be treated

inequitably; (2) arrangement with the last group of workers hired underscores God's generosity born out of freedom to give as he wishes; and (3) equal distribution of the same reward indicates that all genuine disciples are equal before God (225).

[52]Blomberg objects to this tendency: "Commentators who restrict the meaning of a parable to only one main point invariably try to excise one or more of these verses [vv. 13-14a, vv. 14b-15, and v. 16] as later appendices. If a parable can make three points, then the entire passage fits together as a tightly knit unity" (ibid.).

[53]For several of Jesus' parables that employ unexpected features and exaggeration in various ways, see Huffman, "Atypical Features in the Parables," 207-20.

[54]On reward as life in the kingdom, not a proportional gradation of heavenly awards, see Craig L. Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (1992): 159-72. On pages 160-62 he focuses upon Matt 20:1-16. See also Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 221-25.

[55]France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 748.

[56]"Friend," as used in Matthew's Gospel, bears a wry touch of irony (cf. 22:12; 26:50). Cf. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 370.

[57]Blomberg makes the case that the use of "evening" or "twelfth-hour imagery" represents the Last Day (*Interpreting the Parables*, 224). He refers to Hans Weder, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu als Metaphern* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 223.

[58]G. De Ru believes that Jesus formulated the parable and aimed it originally against the scribes and Pharisees but that Matthew redirects it to Peter. "This parable, which was originally directed against the scribes and Pharisees, was repeatedly applied by the early Christians to Jesus' own followers, that is the Church itself. The way in which the Evangelist connects it with Peter's question (Matth. xix 27) clearly shows this" ("The Conception of Reward in the Teaching of Jesus," *Novum Testamentum* 8 [1966]: 209-10).

[59]David McClister sees Matt 17:22-20:19 as an elaborate chiasm with the Vineyard parable subsumed within 19:16-20:16, which correlates to 17:24-27 ("'Where Two or Three are Gathered Together': Literary Structure as a Key to Meaning in Matt 17:22-20:19," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39 [1996]: 549-58). His observation concerning the role of the vineyard parable within the context is on target: "A paradox is thus highlighted: The way of sacrifice and selflessness is the way to abundance and glory; the way of loss is the way to gain. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard that immediately follows, however, tempers our understanding of this concept. Reward in the kingdom is not a matter of piling up a great number of meritorious sacrificial works. It is a matter of grace" (553).

Sermon: The Parable of the Sower

Kirk Wellum

Matthew 13 contains eight parables about the kingdom of heaven, that is, the saving reign of God that has broken into human history in Jesus Christ. These parables are divided into two sections of four parables each. The first four (the parables of the Sower, the Weeds, the Mustard Seed, and the Yeast) are spoken in public to the crowds that were following Jesus. The last four (the parables of the Hidden Treasure, the Pearl, the Net and the Teacher of the Law) are spoken to the disciples when they were alone with Jesus. Taken together they compose the third of five major teaching sections in Matthew's Gospel (cf. Matthew 5-7; 10, 13, 18, 24-25). By this arrangement Matthew is most likely presenting Jesus as someone greater than Moses in that he fulfills the law and the prophets, or what we know as the Old Testament scriptures.

Kirk Wellum is Principal and Professor of Biblical Studies, Pastoral and Systematic Theology at Toronto Baptist Seminary in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Prior to this, he served as a church planter and pastor from 1982-2006 in various churches in Southern Ontario. He has written many articles and is a contributor to *A Foundation for Life: A Study of Key Christian Doctrines and their Application* (Joshua Press, 2003) and *The British Particular Baptists* (Particular Baptist Press, 2003)

Nothing in Matthew's Gospel is superfluous and this amazing cluster of parables is no exception. To understand them we must see that they are related to Matthew's overall portrait of Jesus. In his Gospel, they come after Jesus' words regarding the fickle response of the crowd to John the Baptist (11:1-18), and his subsequent judgment on the unrepentant cities in which most of his miracles were performed (11:19-24). But all is not judgment. At the end of Matthew 11 Jesus speaks about things which are hidden and things which are revealed according to the sovereign good pleasure of the Father (vv. 25-26), and the necessity of divine revelation if anyone is to understand what is going on (v. 27). He then invites the weary and burdened to find rest in him (vv. 28-30).

In Matthew 12 Jesus presents himself as the Lord of the Sabbath against the backdrop of bitter opposition on the part of the Jewish leaders, thereby illustrating the truth articulated in the previous chapter that unless God gives light and rest not even the religious elites will understand who Jesus is and take refuge in him as God's Messiah. So blind are Christ's contemporaries that he calls them "this wicked generation" (12:45), and chapter 12 closes with a thinly veiled warning that natural family ties are not enough when it comes to the kingdom of heaven. What is required is a

SBJT 13.3 (2009): 52-57.

new relationship to the heavenly Father that is revealed by obedience to his will, and this, in turn, identifies the obedient as the brothers and sisters and mothers of Jesus (12:46-50). This prepares the way for the parables of Matthew 13 which explain Jesus and his relationship to the kingdom of heaven from another perspective as well as the opposition that he is experiencing.

Although there has been much debate about the nature of Jesus' parables, they are best seen as *simple stories designed to teach spiritual truths*. Consequently, we must be careful that we don't read too much or too little into them. In this regard we must be particularly careful with the parable of the Sower because the parable itself is more detailed than most and it receives more extensive exposition by Jesus than the other parables.

At the most basic level the parable of the Sower is about hearing the word of God. Jesus says, "Whoever has ears, let them hear" (13:9). This is a vital matter because according to the parable how we hear the word of God, particularly the word spoken by Jesus, determines our destiny. The knowledge of the kingdom of heaven has been made known in Jesus, and through his inspired apostles, in a way that surpasses anything in the Old Testament. Great mysteries have been revealed; mysteries that prophets and righteous men longed to see (13:17) but were unable to see because of their location in redemptive history. With the coming of Christ, the veil has been pulled back and the truth of God has been revealed. However, this new clarity means increased responsibility. We are responsible to take to heart what we hear and to put it into practice. If we don't, we will be judged just as the people in Jesus' day were judged.

The parables in Matthew 13 not only reveal the great truth that God has begun to rule in Jesus, they conceal it as well. The truth is concealed from those who really don't want to hear it, but it is revealed to those who want to listen. The judicial function of parables is often overlooked. Jesus is not merely telling parables as stories in order to show how to communicate with a basically illiterate crowd.

When asked by his disciples why he speaks to the people in parables he replies, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Those who have will be given more, and they will have an abundance. As for those who do not have, even what they have will be taken from them. This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand'" (13:11-13). According to Jesus his use of parables fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah which speaks of a judgment of hardening because the people refused to believe what God had revealed down through the years.

Jesus' words underline the fact that it a great privilege to hear the word of God, and particularly the word of God as it is now illuminated by the ministry of Jesus. This privilege is not taken seriously enough in our day. We cannot assume that there are churches where the word of God is faithfully preached in every town and city across the country and around the world. There are many churches, but there are not many places where the word of God is carefully expounded and applied to the listeners.

Where churches exist that honor the word we should praise God and do our best to support their ministries. And if we have the privilege of being in such a church and sitting under that kind of ministry we should take full advantage of every opportunity to hear the word of God. The parable of the Sower ought to shake us up and stir us from our lethargy and move us to ask God to give us ears to hear what he is saying, because *how we hear the word of God determines our destiny*.

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

In this parable Jesus makes use of a common image in the first century in the Middle East. He speaks of a sower, or farmer, with a bag of seed slung over his shoulder going out into his field to scatter seed. The farmer scatters freely and is

very generous with his seed. He does not test the soil first to see whether it is worth the effort, but instead he casts the seed in every direction.

And so it is that, as he scatters the seed, some fell along the path, on soil that was packed down by those who used it to get from one place to another. Because of the pounding of many feet the soil was hard and the seed just lay on the surface, unable to penetrate the ground. This exposed seed did not escape the notice of the birds who are always looking for food at sowing time and when they saw it they swooped down and had a free meal at the farmer's expense.

Other seed that was sown fell on rocky places. We should not imagine that the farmer is throwing seed on large outcroppings of bare rock. The rocky places describe shallow soil covering a shelf of limestone rock a few inches below the surface. This type of soil provided a varied environment for the seed. At first the shallowness did not adversely affect the seed. In fact, it initially provided what we could call "an accelerated growing environment." In the shallow soil there would be a combination of moisture and warmth that would foster quick germination. And so in the beginning things would look very promising for the young plants, but with the passage of time, the same sun which heated the shallow soil soon dried it out. Without the ability to sink its roots deep into the ground because of the underlying rock, the young plant that showed so much promise withered and died.

Still other seed fell among thorns, that is, on ground that was infested with the root systems of thorny plants. When clearing the land the farmer had cut down the thorn bushes but had not pulled out the roots. At first the seed started to grow and the plants looked healthy until the thorns began to grow alongside them. Then the plants found themselves fighting for moisture and nutrients that they could not win and eventually they were choked and died. Weeds and thorns grow naturally in the soil of this world and they are extremely hardy and adaptable. But plants that are good for food must be carefully cultivated or they will not grow to maturity and provide nourishment for the farmer and his family.

Still other seed fell on good soil. It was not hard like the path, or shallow like the soil covering the rock, or infested with the root of thorns. Rather it was deep and nutrient rich, and it had been ploughed and made ready to receive the seed. The new plants could sink their roots down into the soil and draw out the moisture and nutrients they needed even during the heat of summer. There was no competition with other plants for space or food and so the seed germinated and grew, and at the appointed time produced a crop. Jesus says that it produced a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown. This is a remarkable yield given reports in some of the literature of only a fivefold or sixfold return in Italy and Sicily, and seven or eightfold return in Egypt depending on the kind of crop sown. The abundance of the return makes up for the failure of the seed on the hard, shallow, and infested ground, and the farmer has an abundant return on his labors.

THE INTERPRETATION OF JESUS

One of the unique characteristics of the parable of the Sower is the detailed interpretation given by Jesus and recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8). The other parables in Matthew 13, with the notable exception of the parable of the weeds (13:24-30; 36-43), contain very little exposition. Some skeptics believe this is because the interpretation of the parable does not represent the teaching of the historical Jesus but the later ideas of a religious community. But there is no good reason to hold such a position. In Mark's account, when Jesus is questioned about the meaning of the parable by his disciples, he says to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?" (4:13). This would seem to indicate that there is something about the parable of the Sower that we must understand if we are to unlock the meaning of all the parables. This vital aspect of the kingdom of heaven requires further, more

detailed explanation if the original disciples, and if we, are to understand what is going on. And so, there are perfectly sound contextual reasons why this parable receives more extensive treatment from our Lord, and there is no need to turn to other explanations that call into question the integrity of the biblical text.

The seed sown on the path represents those who hear the message of the kingdom but do not understand it. According to Jesus the seed is the "message of the kingdom" or what we know as "the gospel," which tells of God's reign in Christ in the hearts of his people. In Mark 4:18 and Luke 8:11 respectively, the seed is directly identified as "the word" and "the word of God." Those represented by the hardened path are those who hear the gospel but it makes no impact on them because they do not see its significance or relevance to their lives. Consequently it lies exposed on the surface of their hearts, and when the evil one sees it sitting there he swoops down like a vulture and snatches it away.

This reminds us that Satan and his fallen cohorts are present where the word of God is proclaimed. Their aim is to keep the word from having its intended impact. They know the power of the word even though they do not bow in submission to it, and they know that their best chance of blunting the force of the word is to keep it from falling into the human heart. This explains the sense of oppression that we can feel on such occasions. Sometimes, one of the most difficult parts of the Christian life, is to read the Bible. As believers we love the Bible, but, even so, it can be difficult to read it with understanding, or to stay awake when reading it, or to retain its contents as we go about our lives. Some of this difficulty is the result of our sinfulness but some of it is most certainly the result of evil spiritual influences and personages that try to snatch away the word as quickly as it is sown.

What Jesus says here about Satan provides yet another reason we need God's help and the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit if we are to profit from the word. God is not only the ultimate author of scripture but he is the one who must bring it home to our hearts with saving and sanctifying power. At the very least this means that we should pray that God would bless his word whenever it is read and preached. If the word merely lies on the surface of our hearts it will not do us any good.

The seed falling on the rocky, shallow soil represents those who hear the word of God and receive it with joy. At first they seem so promising. There is an enthusiastic response and everyone is encouraged. The Lord seems so real to them and they speak freely of his love and grace. They get involved in a church and are willing to serve everywhere. They turn their backs on their old way of life and for a time everyone is talking about what has happened to them and is praising God.

But this effervescent stage only lasts a short time. When trouble or persecution comes into their lives because of the Word, they quickly fall away and everyone is left shaking their heads. What has happened? Why are these hearers of the Word so easily disillusioned? They fall away because they have not heard and received into their hearts the whole gospel message. When the gospel is proclaimed they latch on to the message of forgiveness or belonging, or peace, or satisfaction, or joy, or love, which are all a legitimate part of the gospel. But as wonderful as all these things are, they do not represent the whole gospel. Along with the promised blessings of the gospel we are called to take up our cross and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34-38), we are told to gouge out and throw away right eyes and cut off and throw away right hands (Matt 5:29-30), we are told to be holy because without holiness no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14), we are told that we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22), and many other similar challenges. Those represented by the shallow soil only hear half the message. They have not counted the cost of being a disciple of Christ and so what starts well, ends in disaster.

Unfortunately, this scenario is far too com-

mon, and it is sometimes made worse by unbalanced ideas about assurance that fail to stress that true faith perseveres and produces discipleship. When this happens false hopes may be generated in the temporary convert, their family and the Christian community. Then instead of challenging them to repent and believe the gospel they are merely viewed as backslidden or as carnal Christians, which only aggravates the situation. The temporary believer can then become more difficult to reach than before because they may mistakenly believe that they are saved and secure even though there is no visible evidence in their lives. Such a mistake may prove fatal in the end, and from a pastoral point of view is irresponsible. We need to tell people the whole truth about the kingdom of heaven. In itself this will not guarantee that no one will defect because Jesus plainly teaches that some will, but at least we have fulfilled our responsibility to them, and we have not twisted or distorted the gospel in an attempt to justify or excuse their behavior.

The seed falling among the thorns represents those who hear the word of God and receive it into their hearts to some degree, but they eventually prove unfruitful because the word is choked by the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth. At first these look promising, but they disappoint in the end because there has been no deep and thorough work of repentance. The roots of materialistic desires, thoughts, hopes, and dreams—which, if left unchecked, will choke the word—have not been pulled out of the heart. There is an attempt to serve the Lord and the things of this life at the same time. The two specific things mentioned—the worries of life and the deceitfulness of wealth—may seem relatively benign in themselves, but they can be just as deadly as the most notorious sins. The "worries of life" distract from what is most important and deny the Lord the exclusive loyalty that he demands. The "deceitfulness of wealth" lies in the promise of a good, carefree life based on accumulating possessions only to discover that we cannot serve both God and money or buy our way into the new heaven and earth.

Those represented by the infested soil do not realize that true spirituality is like an exotic plant that must be carefully cultivated, whereas sin is like a weed that thrives on its own. The real tragedy is that these dead people often remain planted in their pews for years. In fact, they may be as completely dead spiritually speaking and yet continue to teach Sunday School, serve on church boards, attend services, sing hymns and songs of praise, mouth words in prayer, and otherwise go through the proper motions. But in the end they are as useless to the kingdom of heaven as dead plants in a farmer's field.

Radically dealing with all known sin including the more socially respectable sins like anxious worry, greed, and material idolatry is not optional in the Christian life. These thorns must be rooted out if we are to benefit from the word of God proclaimed to us. In this regard, we need to pray for one another and encourage each other in our Christian walk. And we must be willing to confront each other in love when it comes to laziness, coldness of heart, or the presence of improper ambitions, knowing the eternal issues that are at stake if these are allowed to take hold in our hearts.

The seed falling on the good soil represents those who receive the word and allow it to impact their lives, not just for a short time but for a lifetime. In the words of Jesus they (1) hear the word, (2) understand it, and (3) produce a crop. Some think that "crop" refers to other converts that are produced as a result of sharing of the gospel. While I would not want to rule this out completely, I think the primarily fruitfulness is that of personal holiness, or the reproduction of what Paul calls "the fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5:22-23) in their lives. The good soil represents people who have been renewed and transformed by the life-giving, life-changing power of God. They are not perfect, and will not be until they see Jesus in glory, but by God's grace they do make a difference where God has placed them.

This is the only proper and saving response to the word of God. The other three responses are inadequate. It is important to understand that the three inadequate responses do not indicate a problem with the quality of the seed sown by the farmer. The seed in every instance is the good seed of the word of God. Nor is there a problem with the sower, who in this case is the Lord Jesus himself. He is not stingy when it comes to sowing the seed and will settle for nothing less than a harvest. Where the word is sown and people reject or ignore it, he will eventually come in judgment.

The question is this: Do you and I have ears to hear? The parable of the Sower highlights our responsibility as human beings to respond to the word of God and to receive it into our hearts. We must make sure that our hearts are not hard and insensitive, or shallow and superficial, or thorny and inhospitable to the word of God. We must break up our hard hearts, and remove the rocks and weeds that hinder the word from growing and bearing the fruit of conversion and Christian character in our lives.

But fortunately that is not all that the Bible says about human hearts or about the sower. If it was, we might despair. Anyone who has tried to make their bad heart good knows that it is impossible without God's powerful intervention. The Bible tells us that the great sower himself, the Lord Jesus Christ, has the power to transform the human heart. He can break up our hard hearts, he can remove the rock which keeps the word from growing deep, and he can remove the roots of sin which contaminate our hearts and eventually choke the good seed of the word.

In short, he can transform hearts that are unfit to receive the word into good hearts in which the word will grow and produce the fruit that only the divine word can cultivate. And so the parable of the Sower ought to drive us to him. It is a kingdom parable that speaks of God's gracious intervention in Jesus and it reaches its climax at the cross where Christ died to save his people from their sins. He died and rose again that we might live new lives in the power of his Holy Spirit, and he will perfect what he has begun when we see him face to face. Therefore, if we understand the parable properly as part of Matthew's portrait of Jesus that does not reach its conclusion till the end of his Gospel, it will teach us to make our way to him and ask him to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. No one need despair. There is help in Jesus.