

Probing the Parables



Parables

The parables of Jesus make up a crucial part of the Bible. Jesus had the wisdom to simplify the profound spiritual truths he needed to share with humanity in the form of relatable stories that are easy to understand.

A parable is a tale about a simple, common subject to illustrate a deeper, valuable moral lesson.

The source definition of the word “parable” means a placement side by side for the purpose of comparison.

- www.biblestudytools.com

Again this year, as we journey through Lent, we have a Meditation and Prayer Focus for each of the Forty Days. We will explore some of the Parables of Jesus... seeking to learn, or be encouraged by, the lesson being taught. Hopefully this will strengthen our discipleship as we renew our commitment to follow Jesus.

The format for each of the 40 days is:

- read the parable (sometimes paralleled in more than one Gospel);
- think about the lesson being taught and how to apply it; and
- pray for wisdom, guidance and strength
- share a quote.

I encourage you to read the full scripture passage referred to (the entire parable) on the days when only a portion is quoted, even when the same Parable is used several times, in different weeks.

Each Sunday there is an **Encouragement** based on a scripture text, intended to serve as a reinforcement of the lessons based on the theme of the previous week.

At its simplest a parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.

- C. H. Dodd

Then the disciples came to Jesus and asked him, “Why do you use parables when you talk to the people?”

“The reason I use parables in talking to them is that they look, but do not see, and they listen, but do not hear or understand.”

Jesus used parables to tell all these things to the crowds; he would not say a thing to them without using a parable.

- Matthew 13:10, 13, 34

40 Days of Probing the Parables of Jesus

Wednesday 17 February through Saturday 3rd April 2021

WEEK ONE

Parables about PRAYER

Day 1	Wednesday 17 February <i>(Ash Wednesday)</i>	Matthew 15:10-20 / Mark 7:14-23
Day 2	Thursday 18 February	Luke 18:1-8
Day 3	Friday 19 February	Luke 18:9-14
Day 4	Saturday 20 February	Luke 11:5-13

Sunday 21 February (1st Sunday in Lent) *Watch And Pray*

WEEK TWO

Parables about PRIORITIES

Day 5	Monday 22 February	Luke 12:13-21
Day 6	Tuesday 23 February	Luke 14:7-14
Day 7	Wednesday 24 February	Luke 15:4-7 / Matthew 18:12-14
Day 8	Thursday 25 February	Luke 15:8-10
Day 9	Friday 26 February	Luke 15:11-32
Day 10	Saturday 27 February	Matthew 13:44-46

Sunday 28 February (2nd Sunday in Lent) *Seek First The Kingdom Of God*

WEEK THREE

Parables about PERSPECTIVE

Day 11	Monday 01 March	Matthew 7:1-5
Day 12	Tuesday 02 March	Matthew 9:16-17 / Mark 2:21-22
Day 13	Wednesday 03 March	Matthew 24:32-35 / Mark 13:28-33
Day 14	Thursday 04 March	Mark 7:14-23
Day 15	Friday 05 March	Luke 16:19-31
Day 16	Saturday 06 March	Luke 18:9-14

Sunday 07 March (3rd Sunday in Lent) *God's Ways... Not Our Ways*

WEEK FOUR

Parables about PERSISTENCE

Day 17	Monday 08 March	Matthew 13:24-30
Day 18	Tuesday 09 March	Matthew 18:10-14
Day 19	Wednesday 10 March	Matthew 18:23-35
Day 20	Thursday 11 March	Matthew 22:1-10
Day 21	Friday 12 March	Luke 15:11-32
Day 22	Saturday 13 March	John 15:1-10

Sunday 14 March (4th Sunday in Lent)

Press Toward The Mark

WEEK FIVE

Parables about PRODUCTIVITY

Day 23 Monday 15 March
Day 24 Tuesday 16 March
Day 25 Wednesday 17 March
Day 26 Thursday 18 March
Day 27 Friday 19 March
Day 28 Saturday 20 March

Mark 4:21-25 / Matthew 5:14-16
Mark 4:1-20 / Matthew 13:1-23
Mark 4:30-34 / Matthew 13:31-32
Matthew 13:33-34
Matthew 21:28-32
Luke 13:6-9

Sunday 21 March (5th Sunday in Lent)

Faith Without Works Is Dead

WEEK SIX

Parables about PUNISHMENT

Day 29 Monday 22 March
Day 30 Tuesday 23 March
Day 31 Wednesday 24 March
Day 32 Thursday 25 March
Day 33 Friday 26 March
Day 34 Saturday 27 March

Matthew 18:23-35
Matthew 24:45-51 / Mark 13:34-37
Matthew 25:1-13
Matthew 25:14-30
Luke 12:41-48
Matthew 15:10-20

Sunday 28 March (Palm Sunday)

God Disciplines Those He Loves

WEEK SEVEN

Holy Week

Parables about POWER

Day 35 Monday 29 March
Day 36 Tuesday 30 March
Day 37 Wednesday 31 March
Day 38 Thursday 01 April
(Maundy Thursday)
Day 39 Friday 02 April
(Good Friday)
Day 40 Saturday 03 April

Matthew 12:24-30 / Mark 3:23-27
Mark 12:1-12 / Matthew 21:33-45
Matthew 12:24-30 / Mark 3:23-27
Matthew 20:1-16
Luke 10:29-37
Matthew 13:47-50

Sunday 04 April (EASTER)

Through Christ Who Strengthens Me

All scripture passages are from the Good News Translation unless otherwise noted.



Pieces to solve Life's Puzzles
from the Master Puzzle Solver

What Makes You Unclean

Matthew 15:10-20 / Mark 7:14-23

Then Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand! It is not what goes into your mouth that makes you ritually unclean; rather, what comes out of it makes you unclean." (Matthew 15:10-11)

Jesus said to them. "Don't you understand? Nothing that goes into you from the outside can really make you unclean, because it does not go into your heart but into your stomach and then goes on out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared that all foods are fit to be eaten.) (Mark 7:18-19)

Here is how Richard J. Foster defines 'prayer' in his book *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*:

[God] is inviting us to come home, to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created. His arms are outstretched wide to receive us. His heart is enlarged to take us in. . .

The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer.

While at first glance this parable does not seem to be about prayer, a closer look reveals that it is exactly what Jesus is talking about. If prayer is to 'come home' and be in the 'heart of God' then we need to ensure that our hearts are in tune with God's heart. This is the point of the parable: Jesus wants us to understand that it is not about what food we eat, or things we take into our body... it's about what is in our heart. That is what will come out in our attitudes, in our value system, and in our behaviour!

Prayer, then, should be connecting our heart with God's heart -- communing with God at the heart-level. What brings joy to the heart of God is what should bring joy to us... and what breaks the heart of God should break our hearts also.

PRAYER

Gracious God, as you open your heart to let me in, may I open my heart to take more of you in.

May your love and grace shape the contours of my heart, that I may more and more resemble you. Though I will not be totally like you until I am with you in eternity, I ask that each day you will

*change my heart, O God... make it ever true;
change my heart, O God... may I be like you.*

An old Hebrew Hymn has God saying to us:

*Listen, listen, listen
to my heart-song...*

*I will never
forget you;
I will never
forsake you.*

The Widow and the Judge

Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to teach them that they should always pray and never become discouraged. “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people. And there was a widow in that same town who kept coming to him and pleading for her rights, saying, ‘Help me against my opponent!’”
 (Luke 18:1-3)

We don’t have to think too hard about the meaning of this parable, as we are given it in the introduction to what Jesus said: it is to teach his disciples that they should always pray and never become *discouraged*. The persistence of the widow finally wears down the Judge, and he (albeit grudgingly) pays enough attention to her to understand what she wants, and then gives her “her rights”.

In his explanation of this parable Jesus says that we don’t have to “wear God out” as the widow did the judge. “Will God be slow to help them?” he asks. No, he assures, God will “judge in their favor and do it quickly” (verses 7 and 8). So the teaching to ‘always pray’ is not meant for us to irritate God enough that he responds, even if not happily. No, it is to express our delight in consistently communing with God. It is have our hearts always tuned to God’s heart... to be always listening to God’s heart-song!

This constant persistence in prayer is also encouraged in **Thessalonians 5:16-18**, where we are told:

Be joyful always, pray at all times, be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants from you in your life in union with Christ Jesus.

To “pray at all times” means that prayer is not so much about the words we use, or where we are, or our posture -- we may want to be on our knees with our eyes closed and our hands clasped, but it’s not required -- it’s about always being connected to God’s heart.

PRAYER

Gracious God, I ask that you help me to hear you calling me. . . especially when your voice is softer than the blows the world is throwing at me; gentler than the rough treatment I sometimes get; quieter than the chaos around me; when I would miss it if I wasn’t close to you. . .

Help me to believe that you know best, and that you will never lead me down any path that takes me away from you. In your love I trust. Amen.



The Pharisee and The Tax Collector

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus also told this parable to people who were sure of their own goodness and despised everybody else. "Once there were two men who went up to the Temple to pray: one was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood apart by himself and prayed, 'I thank you, God, that I am not greedy, dishonest, or an adulterer, like everybody else. I thank you that I am not like that tax collector over there. I fast two days a week, and I give you one tenth of all my income.'

But the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even raise his face to heaven, but beat on his breast and said, 'God, have pity on me, a sinner!' 'I tell you,' said Jesus, "the tax collector, and not the Pharisee, was in the right with God when he went home. For those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great." (Luke 18:9-14)

This parable is definitely about prayer, and actually includes the prayers of two people who both went to the Temple to pray. Though they went to the same place, at the same time, to pray to the same God, there is a great chasm between them! Jesus describes them in vivid detail, though in relatively few words. He describes the differences in their attitudes, in their body language, as well as in their words.

The Pharisee elevates himself by pushing others down... he extols his virtues by condemning others... he brags on his spirituality by judging others... and his self-righteousness suffocates everyone else! I imagine he's squinting around -- to see who is noticing him -- when he spies the tax collector. Well, he just has to inform God (in case God didn't know!) that he is not like that tax collector... no sir, he is superior to that worthless waste of a human!

In contrast the tax collector, humbly acknowledging his need for God, blurts out a prayer in which he asks for mercy, grace and forgiveness. He hit the target! He was the one, said Jesus, "who was in the right with God when he went home" (verse 14).

PRAYER

Be merciful to me, O God, because of your constant love.
 Because of your great mercy wipe away my sins!
 Wash away all my evil and make me clean from my sin!
 Sincerity and truth are what you require;
 fill my mind with your wisdom.
 Create a pure heart in me, O God,
 and put a new and loyal spirit in me.
 My sacrifice is a humble spirit, O God;
 you will not reject a humble and repentant heart. (Psalm 51)

*Prayer does
 not change
 God,
 but it
 changes him
 who prays.*

Soren Kierkegaard

Not Ashamed to Keep on Asking

Luke 11:5-13

And Jesus said to his disciples, "Suppose one of you should go to a friend's house at midnight and say, 'Friend, let me borrow three loaves of bread. A friend of mine who is on a trip has just come to my house, and I don't have any food for him!' And suppose your friend should answer from inside, 'Don't bother me! The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' Well, what then? I tell you that even if he will not get up and give you the bread because you are his friend, yet he will get up and give you everything you need because you are not ashamed to keep on asking. (Luke 11:5-8)

Similar to the parable of 'The Widow and The Judge' (Day 2), this parable seems to emphasize that persistence in pleading and asking is what will get results. In the last part of this scripture passage (not quoted above) Jesus reminds his disciples to "Ask... Seek... Knock..." (verses 9-10) and assures us that our Father in heaven knows what to give us. He will "give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (verses 11-13). These sentiments are paralleled in the 'Sermon on the Mount' -- see Matthew 7:7-11. It almost sounds like we have to pester God to get a response to our prayers. But that is not what is meant here... I think not being "ashamed to keep on asking" is another way of saying:

I'll keep on asking (and seeking and knocking) until you respond, Lord, because you are the only one who can help me. I won't let my pride get in the way, thinking I don't need anyone. I won't let my ego be an obstacle, thinking I can do it myself. I know my need, so I will keep on asking.

This attitude toward God, and this response to our heavenly Father, is what gets results. We can't rush the process... sometimes the waiting is a test of our *faith* (do we really believe?); or a challenge to our *patience* (can we truly wait on the Lord?); or an acknowledgement of our *humility* (can we admit we need God?).

PRAYER

Father, take our faith and deepen it. . .
 take our minds and think through them,
 take our mouths and speak through them,
 take our lives and live through them.
 Father, take us in our weakness and empower us. . .
 take the young and guide them,
 take the old and refresh them,
 take those who are damaged and restore them.
 Father, take us, and keep us, we pray.



The Prelude: Jesus and his disciples ate the Passover Meal together;
he had shared bread and wine with them;
he told them one of them would betray him...

While they were at the table eating, Jesus said, “I tell you that one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me.” (Mark 14:18)

The Present: They are in the Garden of Gethsemane;
Jesus takes Peter, James and John aside;
he leaves them and goes off to pray;
he returns to find them asleep...

And he said to them, “Keep watch, and pray that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Mark 14:38)

The Postlude: The soldiers come...
Judas kisses him;
the soldiers arrest him;
his disciples abandon him...

Then all the disciples left him and ran away. (Mark 14:50)

On another occasion Jesus said to his disciples:
“Be on watch and pray always that you will have the strength to go safely through all those things that will happen and to stand before the Son of Man.” (Luke 21:36)

To **watch** implies that we have our eyes open and we are on full alert...
to **pray** requires us to block out distractions as we commune with God...

Can we do both at the same time? YES. In the spiritual sense we have to ‘watch’ so that we don’t stumble, while we ‘pray’ for guidance and strength. The ‘watching’ is how we demonstrate our discipleship -- how much we’ve learned from and grown in Christ -- while the ‘praying’ is our acknowledgement that we have not yet arrived... we are still in need of God’s grace.

<u>WATCH</u>	and	<u>PRAY</u>
Open the eyes of my heart, Lord Open the eyes of my heart, I want to see you, I want to see you.		To see you high and lifted up, shining in the light of Your glory; Pour out Your power and love as we sing ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’

(lyrics by Michael W. Smith)

Those Who are Not Rich in God's Sight

Luke 12:13-21

Then Jesus told them this parable: "There was once a rich man who had land which bore good crops. He began to think to himself, 'I don't have a place to keep all my crops. What can I do? This is what I will do,' he told himself; 'I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, where I will store the grain and all my other goods. Then I will say to myself, Lucky man! You have all the good things you need for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink, and enjoy yourself!' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night you will have to give up your life; then who will get all these things you have kept for yourself?'"

And Jesus concluded, "This is how it is with those who pile up riches for themselves but are not rich in God's sight." (Luke 12:16-21)

As Jesus relates this parable the selfishness of the rich man is obvious -- notice the language: 'he thought to himself'... 'I don't have'... 'what can I do?'... 'I will tear down'... "I will store'... 'I will say to myself'... He is concerned only with himself; no one else is thought about, mentioned, or considered.

This is the problem... when our priorities mean we push everyone else out of the picture so that we can fill the frame, we have a problem. The fragility of life confronts this man at the height of his success -- when your life ends, what happens to all this? That needs to be considered before we reach that end point. We need to prioritize our values, our activities, our spending habits... everything in life needs to be ordered, so that it makes sense and reflects what matters to us.

To be "rich in God's sight" means that we are wealthy in the things that please God. Piling up for ourselves -- being totally selfish -- is not the way God expects us to behave. "For God so loved that He gave..." (John 3:16) and so should we!

PRAYER

Let us bring to God our loving Father all the cares that weigh on our hearts, knowing that He understands us better than we understand ourselves.

Father, we bring our daily work...

Father, we bring our loved ones...

Father, we bring the suffering, the hurt, the wounded...

Father, we bring those whose lives are empty of meaning...

Filled with thankfulness for all your many blessings to us, we offer you our praise. May we never forget your generosity.

- adapted from *Prayers of Intercession* by Susan Sayers

OPEN HANDS are for



giving... helping...
lifting... applauding...

Those Who Make Themselves Great Will Be Humbled

Luke 14:7-14

When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place... Instead, when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that your host will come to you and say, 'Come on up, my friend, to a better place.' This will bring you honor in the presence of all the other guests. For those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great."

(Luke 14:8,10-11)

I guess people everywhere are the same... in different ages and cultures and customs, certain things are common among people. Just like today, there were also some people in Jesus' day, who tried to push themselves in at special events, who wanted to sit at the head table even if they resembled the tail, who tried to impress everyone by how important they thought they were!

Jesus uses this parable to help his followers understand that when we strut around like peacocks, trying to impress -- "making ourselves great" -- we will be humbled. Based on what he observed at an actual banquet, Jesus uses this event to teach a lesson: humble yourself, or someone will bring you down.

The country song, "O Lord, it's hard to humble when you're perfect in every way" is meant to be taken tongue-in-cheek. It's taking a playful jab at our pride, it's gently puncturing our over-inflated egos, it's deconstructing our self-righteousness... we are not *all that!* Be considerate, be thoughtful, be care-full. This is God's way, and should be our way as well.

Then Jesus goes on to say that we should do things without expecting to be repaid -- we should do good things for those who we know cannot give us anything in return.

PRAYER

God of love, we thank you for one another, and for all the wonderful blessings you bring into our lives through other people -- our families, our friends, our teachers, our colleagues.

May we, in our turn, help to bring your blessing into their lives. And in the world at large, too, may we recognize how much we depend on one another. May people behave thankfully and humbly, not cruelly or contemptuously.

And help us to make Jesus known as Lord, by honouring him in our daily living as well as in our Sunday speaking.

- Contemporary Prayers for Church & School



Don't sit in the best place... someone more important may have been invited!

First Things First: Find the Lost

Luke 15:4-7 / Matthew 18:12-14

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them—what do you do? You leave the other ninety-nine sheep in the pasture and go looking for the one that got lost until you find it. (Luke 15:4)

We prioritize our lives all the time... it's just that sometimes we don't realize that we are doing it. Jesus uses this parable to reinforce a lesson I'm sure his disciples already knew: priorities shift in an emergency! Caring for the all the sheep is the priority, until *one goes missing*, then that one becomes the priority! It doesn't mean you ignore the rest -- no, you settle them safely in the pasture, and then you commit all your energy to the search and rescue mission.

Life will bring us emergencies, situations that we have to respond to immediately, things that we have to drop everything else to take care of. In our spiritual lives we may have similar emergencies, but we don't always recognize them as such. The Bible says that all of us, like sheep, go astray -- here's how it's put in Isaiah 53:5-6 (MSG):

We're all like sheep who've wandered off and gotten lost. We've all done our own thing, gone our own way. And God has piled all our sins, everything we've done wrong, on him, on him.

We sort of wander off, heads-in-the-grass, not really noticing that we're moving away from our Shepherd. Then something happens -- we get a wake-up call! -- our routine is shattered by some tragedy or concern that shakes our faith. That's when we realize that the Shepherd has been looking for us all along. And Jesus is waiting to welcome us back into the flock, to be close to him, to be taken care of and provided for by him. He makes it His priority to search for us. . . we need to make it our priority to be found. Or, better yet, not to wander off!

PRAYER

Gracious God, help me to understand what it is most important (to You, which makes it most important to me) and strengthen me to work hard at keeping the main thing the main thing!

Help me to focus on what needs to come at the top of the list, and then to be strong enough to ensure that the first things are put first.

Thank you for your love and grace.
Amen.

**You gotta do what
you HAVE to do
before you can do
what you WANT to
do. It's called
priorities.**

Everything Else is On Hold...

Luke 15:8-10

Or suppose a woman who has ten silver coins loses one of them—what does she do? She lights a lamp, sweeps her house, and looks carefully everywhere until she finds it. When she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, and says to them, ‘I am so happy I found the coin I lost. Let us celebrate!’ In the same way, I tell you, the angels of God rejoice over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:8-10)

We all know the joy of finding something that we lost... the good feeling that comes from realizing that we will not have to do without it. Like the woman in this parable (and like the shepherd in the parable we looked at yesterday) we would rejoice at such good news. And, like them, we’d probably share our joy by telling others so they can rejoice with us. It feels good to find what was lost or missing... whether it’s money, or a pet; our keys, or a password; a sock, or a friend we’ve been reunited with.

Everything was put on hold while the woman searched her house. She lit a lamp to better see this small object, maybe to get a glimpse of a shiny reflection if the light hit it at the right angle. She sweeps the house, checking carefully as she attacks every nook and cranny, maybe uncovering other things she didn’t know were lost! She is busy... she is focussed... she is determined -- she will find the missing coin!

Never mind the laundry to be done, forget the meal to be prepared (he’ll have a sandwich or salad tonight), and the soap operas would have to wait till tomorrow. She was on a mission, and everything else was on hold!

That kind of focus is what Jesus asks of his followers: “If you want to come with me,” He says, “you must forget yourself, take up your cross every day, and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Our spiritual focus should be laser sharp on our relationship with Christ -- “Remain united to me,” He says, otherwise “you cannot bear fruit” (John 15:4).

So if anything gets lost, let’s be sure it’s not us who lost our way!

PRAYER

Father, let the warmth of your love be present in every home in every relationship, in our celebrations and our struggles.

Father, let the power of your healing bring to wholeness those who are disturbed and agitated, suffering in body or mind or spirit.

Father, let your loving mercy bring the dead and dying safely home to heaven, and give comfort to those who mourn.

Father, let your joy fill our lives as we delight in living according to your ways. Amen.

- Susan Sayers



Be sure you have the tools you need to do the job.

New Lease On Life

Luke 15:11-32

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father. He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with pity, and he ran, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him. (Luke 15:17-20)

This is one of the better-known parables of Jesus, and it is found only in the Gospel of Luke. In most parables there is one main point being made, but this one is unusual in that there are several lessons to learn from the different characters. Often referred to as the parable of ‘The Prodigal Son’ it can also be called the parable of ‘The Loving Father’ or ‘The Disgruntled Brother’. We will look at this parable several times in this study, but today we consider the prodigal son -- he left home to see the world, and after being forced to sort out his priorities, he came back to where he belonged.

This prodigal had to hit bottom before he could see a way up. In the pig sty, hungry enough to dine with the swine, he starts thinking about home. He knows that the choices he made has changed his relationship with his father -- so he’ll go back as a servant -- but he seems confident that his father will welcome him back. And he is right! Not only does his father run to meet him, he also throws a party to welcome this wayward son back home! This reminds us of the rejoicing of the shepherd who found his lost sheep, and the woman who found her lost coin -- they also gathered family and friends to celebrate with them.

Jesus said that’s how it is with God... He rejoices whenever one of His comes home -- for the first time, or any time, He’s waiting to celebrate with us!

PRAYER

Lord, sometimes I get myself in some real tight spots... my selfishness or greed sometimes land me in situations that are hard to get out of... when I think I’ve got it all under control sometimes things go horribly wrong...

Please, by Your grace and because of Your mercy, forgive me. Welcome me back home, give me a servant-heart, and make me grateful for all Your goodness.

**IN ORDER TO SAY YES
TO YOUR PRIORITIES
YOU HAVE
TO BE WILLING
TO SAY NO
TO SOMETHING ELSE.**

#AYL20

Recognizing & Appreciating the Valuable

Matthew 13:44-46

The Kingdom of heaven is like this. A man happens to find a treasure hidden in a field. He covers it up again, and is so happy that he goes and sells everything he has, and then goes back and buys that field.

Also, the Kingdom of heaven is like this. A man is looking for fine pearls, and when he finds one that is unusually fine, he goes and sells everything he has, and buys that pearl. (Matthew 13:44-46)

These two short parables make the same point: when you recognize something is so valuable that you cannot do without it, you are willing to make sacrifices in order to have it. Put another way: You do what you have to do to ensure that your top priority is secured.

When our top priority is seeking first God's kingdom, when it is following our Master, when it is pursuing what God wants, then we do what we have to do in order to make that a reality.

These parables demonstrate the commitment required by describing the intense focus on obtaining the treasure/gem, that *everything* is willing to be given in order to acquire the one thing. This is the same type of focus that is encouraged in verse 8 of Philippians, chapter 4 -- in the conclusion to this letter, Paul lists some priorities, and calls his hearers to "fix their thoughts" on what matters most:

And now, brothers, as I close this letter, let me say this one more thing: Fix your thoughts on what is true and good and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely, and dwell on the fine, good things in others. Think about all you can praise God for and be glad about.

And don't miss the point made in both of these parables: the treasure in the field and the fine pearl were found as a result of searching. So we continue to ask, to seek, to knock... God rewards those who seek Him, blesses those who give Him first place.

PRAYER

Day by day, dear Lord,
of You three things I pray:
to see You more clearly,
to follow You more nearly,
to love You more dearly,
day by day.

- St. Richard of Chichester*



Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, also wrote an entire book about one of those habits: *First Things First*. It's about prioritizing... putting the most important things in life in their rightful place. Among many valuable tools he gives, he talks about THE CLOCK AND THE COMPASS:

Our struggle to put first things first can be characterized by the contrast between the two powerful tools that direct us: the clock and the compass.



The clock represents our commitments, appointments, schedules, goals, activities -- what we do with, and how we manage our time.

The compass represents our vision, values, principles, mission, conscience, direction -- what we feel is important and how we lead our lives.



The struggle comes when we sense a gap between the clock and the compass -- when what we do doesn't contribute to what is most important in our lives.

[pp. 19-20]

Our spiritual lives can be just as 'out of balance' as our physical lives. Realizing this, Jesus challenges his disciples to put first things first:

Therefore do not worry or be anxious... But first and most importantly seek (aim at, strive after) His kingdom and His righteousness [His way of doing and being right -- the attitude and character of God], and all these things will be given to you also.

(Matthew 6:31-33 Amplified)

Covey also speaks about 'vision' and the personal mission statement that should result from our vision of our lives:

Vision is the fundamental force that drives everything else in our lives. It impassions us with a sense of the unique contribution that's ours to make. It empowers us to put first things first, compasses ahead of clocks, people ahead of schedules and things. Creating and integrating an empowering personal mission statement is one of the most important investments we can make.

[p. 116]

We don't have to create, but we do have to integrate our mission statement, which is given to us by Jesus:

Put God's work first and do what He wants. Then the other things will be yours as well.

(Matthew 6:33 Contemporary English Version)

Be Careful How We Judge

Matthew 7:1-5

How dare you say to your brother, 'Please, let me take that speck out of your eye,' when you have a log in your own eye? You hypocrite! First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will be able to see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.
(Matthew 7:4-5)

Jesus does not mince his words here -- he says we are "hypocrites" if we judge others while ignoring our own faults, foibles and failures. He introduces this parable by stating quite clearly what it is about: judging other people by our own double-standards. He cautions against judging someone else and deciding they are guilty because, he says, God will judge us the same way we judge others.

This is reminiscent of the "forgiveness" clause of the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples (commonly called *The Lord's Prayer*) as we read in Matthew 6:12:

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

In that same passage, after giving them the prayer, Jesus -- as if to emphasize the point -- goes on to tell his disciples:

"If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done.
(Matthew 6:14-15)

The Pharisees (whom Jesus describes as 'hypocrites' quite often) would have been highly insulted by this parable. After all, since they were more righteous than anyone else, were they not entitled to criticize and judge others? But it is precisely this self-righteousness that Jesus condemns -- how can you see to take a speck out of someone's eye, when you have a log in yours? Jesus is saying to them (and to us): You are not that good! You are not that righteous! You are not God!

PRAYER

Father, in our Christian ministry to one another we need more discernment and less defensiveness, more stillness and less rush.

In our relationships we need more understanding and less intolerance, more encouragement and less condemnation.

In our pain we need your comfort, in our brokenness your forgiveness, in our anguish the assurance of your love,

Father, in you our every need is met and satisfied, and we thank you for the personal love you have for each one of us.

- Susan Sayers

We are very good lawyers for our own mistakes, but very good judges for the mistakes of others.

Be Careful How We Patch & Mend

Matthew 9:16-17 / Mark 2:21-22

No one patches up an old coat with a piece of new cloth, for the new patch will shrink and make an even bigger hole in the coat. Nor does anyone pour new wine into used wineskins, for the skins will burst, the wine will pour out, and the skins will be ruined.
 (Matthew 9:16-17)

While the imagery of this parable may not resonate with us, it would have been the common experience of all who heard Jesus teach. In his day, everyone had coats and every household had wineskins. Coats were the outer garments, worn over the robes that most people wore each day, to provide an extra layer of protection against the cold at night. This is why if it were used as collateral for a loan, it could only be held during the day -- it must be returned to the owner at night. When a coat was torn or needed mending, one might be tempted to use any piece of cloth to make a patch. Using this metaphor of shrinking cloth causing more damage, Jesus is teaching that we have to weigh the relevance of a fix.

Similarly with the wineskins. New wine would continue to ferment, and the fermentation process would result in gases that would cause expansion inside the wineskins. Old skins, which had already stretched and expanded, and could not stretch further, would burst and the wine would be lost. So new wine must be placed in new, softer, more pliable skins that would expand with the increasing volume caused by fermentation. It has to be the right fit.

So, whether fixing something old or setting up something new, we need to consider what 'patch' is right, or which 'fit' is best. Old solutions might not work well in new situations. Your favourite formula might not fit the latest iteration of a problem.

Jesus is reminding us to think things through before we apply a solution, so that the solution we apply will be most effective. Even if's not the quickest, easiest, cheapest way, we must work at finding and applying the most effective solution.

PRAYER

My God, I desire to love Thee perfectly,
 with all my heart which Thou madest for Thyself,
 with all my mind, which only Thou canst satisfy,
 with all my soul which feign would soar to Thee,
 with all my strength, which shrinks before me...
 Claim my heart, fill my mind, uplift my soul, reinforce my
 strength, that when I fail Thou mayest succeed in me, and
 make me love Thee perfectly. Amen.

- Elizabeth Basset*

**IF YOU DON'T LIKE
 SOMETHING CHANGE IT;
 IF YOU CAN'T CHANGE IT,
 CHANGE THE WAY YOU
 THINK ABOUT IT**

MARY ENGELBREIT

Be Careful What We See

Matthew 24:32-35 / Mark 13:28-33

Let the fig tree teach you a lesson. When its branches become green and tender and it starts putting out leaves, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see all these things, you will know that the time is near, ready to begin.

(Matthew 24:32-33)

People have always looked for signs that point to something -- an omen of something good or bad -- a cataclysmic event, a life-changing experience, a predictable result. Jesus told his followers several times to observe the signs... this is one of those times. You can follow the seasons of the year by observing nature, he says. When the fig tree starts to sprout leaves, you know summer is near. So too you can follow other things, if you know what to look for, if you are aware of the signs to pay attention to.

Jesus is talking (in these chapters) about the time when he will return to earth, what we commonly call "the Second Coming." The disciples want to know the time, and what will happen (Matt. 24:3 / Mark 13:4). This parable is part of Jesus' response -- he outlines some of the things they can expect, and the signs they are to watch for!

Then, at the end of this parable (verse 35) Jesus says something remarkable:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Wait a minute! We expect earth to pass away, but isn't heaven eternal -- where we'll be with God forever? This is Jesus' way of saying that His word can be trusted -- even when familiar things are gone, His truth remains.

Watch for the signs... be astute enough to know when changes are coming, and be prepared for them as best you can. They may be earth-shattering events, or they may as mundane as getting old, staying healthy, or meeting your goals.

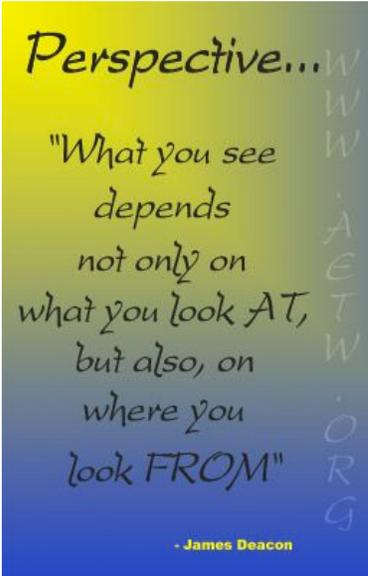
PRAYER

Gracious God, sharpen our spiritual eyesight, so that we can 'see' the things You want us to be aware of. May we not get so caught up in the routine rhythm of life that we miss what matters.

May it not take catastrophes or tragedies to 'wake us up' to what's important. Just as we get our physical eyes tested periodically, motivate us to get a spiritual 'check-up' with Dr. Jesus.

Help us to have the right perspective on life, and to remember that 'right' is always that which aligns with Your will.

Bless us, guide us, strengthen us, we pray. Amen.



Be Careful What We Feed

Mark 7:14-23

And he went on to say, “It is what comes out of you that makes you unclean. For from the inside, from your heart, come the evil ideas which lead you to do immoral things, to rob, kill, commit adultery, be greedy, and do all sorts of evil things; deceit, indecency, jealousy, slander, pride, and folly—all these evil things come from inside you and make you unclean.” (Mark 7:20-23)

We’ve considered this parable before (on Day 1) when we were thinking about prayer, but now we look at it from another angle. From the heart “come the evil ideas” which lead to bad behaviour. When these ideas are fed and nourished they produce evil people. This parable is a word of caution about keeping our ‘insides’ clean, about what is in our hearts, about what grows strong enough to come out in how we live.

The Cherokee people have a parable about a grandfather watching his two grandsons argue and fuss. He calls them over and tells them that each of us has two wolves inside -- one good and kind, the other evil and mean. These two are always fighting inside of us, he explains, and he asks them which one do they think will win? One grandson observes that it is always the strongest wolf who wins. So their grandfather asks the boys which wolf will be the strongest... and they don’t know. “The one you feed,” says the wise grandpa, “that’s the one who is strongest!”

Our attitudes, our values, our goals, our commitment to honesty, decency, integrity... these all have to be nourished in order to grow strong. As does our desire to follow Christ -- we have to feed it so that it grows strong enough to win. We have to look into our hearts and ask ourselves an essential perspective question: “What am I feeding?”

David asked that God would “create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10 CEV). This should be our prayer too. Every day.

PRAYER

Lord, we remember all too well the bitter discoveries we have made when we have tried to run our own lives our own way, when we try to steer our own craft. Wilt Thou come aboard, Lord Jesus, and set us a true course, for we grow weary of life’s demands, tired of our own blundering ways. We seek a clear light to shine upon our troubled way. We ask Thee to give us clearer directions. Where we have missed the way and wandered far, bring us back at whatever cost to our pride. We seek Your peace.

- Peter Marshall*

the
struggle
you're in
today
is developing the
strength
you need for
tomorrow

Be Careful Who We Listen To

Luke 16:19-31

Abraham said, 'Your brothers have Moses and the prophets to warn them; your brothers should listen to what they say.' The rich man answered, 'That is not enough, father Abraham! But if someone were to rise from death and go to them, then they would turn from their sins.' But Abraham said, 'If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone were to rise from death.' (Luke 16:29-31)

In this parable Jesus tells of a poor man named Lazarus who died "and was carried by the angels to sit beside Abraham at the feast in heaven" (v. 22), and contrasts him with a rich man (no name given) who died and was "in Hades, where he was in great pain" (v. 23). Note that these two men knew each other, and note the nature of their relationship (vv. 19-21).

The rich man, who did little or nothing to help the poor man while alive, wants the poor man to help him in death. He who would not give a scrap from his table to Lazarus wants father Abraham to send Lazarus to "dip his finger in some water and cool off" his tongue. When told that this cannot happen, the rich man begs that Lazarus warn his five brothers of what they will face in death if they continue as he did in life. Abraham's response to this request is one of the key points of this parable:

*'Your brothers have Moses and the prophets to warn them;
your brothers should listen to what they say.'*

God has already revealed enough through the **Word** (Law, Prophets & Messiah), **Heart**, **Conscience** and **Experiences** to empower us to make wise choices -- if we will listen to what God is saying! We should not need spectacular events or painful 'wake-up calls' to motivate us to decide. Abraham concludes that if the rich man's brothers didn't listen to Moses and the prophets, "they will not be convinced even if someone were to rise from death" (v. 31). The message: However God speaks, we must listen!

PRAYER

O God, our Father, save us from doubt and distrust. And if misfortune does come to us, grant that any trial may only bring us closer to one another and closer to you; and grant that nothing may shake our certainty that you work all things together for good, and that a Father's hand will never cause his child a needless tear.

Hear our prayer, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

- William Barclay*

**“ MOST PEOPLE
DO NOT listen
with THE INTENT
TO UNDERSTAND;
THEY listen
with THE INTENT
TO REPLY.”**

Stephen D. Cowry

Be Careful What We Think

Luke 18:9-14

The Pharisee stood apart by himself and prayed, 'I thank you, God, that I am not greedy, dishonest, or an adulterer, like everybody else. I thank you that I am not like that tax collector over there. I fast two days a week, and I give you one tenth of all my income.'

(Luke 18:11-12)

Here in this parable (which we previously considered on Day3) Jesus illustrates something that most of us are guilty of... generalization! Like this Pharisee -- he's glad he's not like "everybody else"! -- we often want to throw everyone in the pool. How many times do we contrast ourselves with 'everybody else' in order to look good? How many times do we lump "everybody" together as wrong, to try to prove that we are right? It's a common fault, and we often do it without realizing our error.

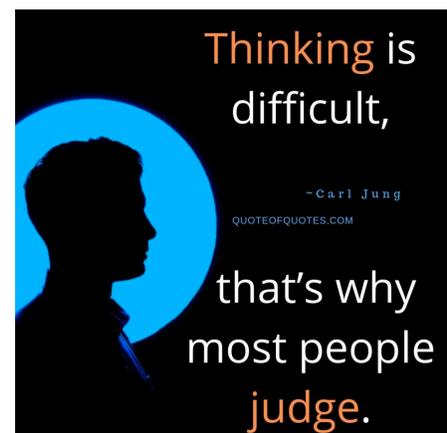
The Pharisee is so caught up in celebrating his own goodness and righteousness (as if God needed a detailed description of who he is and what he's done!) that he has no time or thought for anyone else. His 'tunnel vision' illustrates his shallowness, and his condemnation of others demonstrates his selfishness. His heart is not right, and therefore nothing else lines up. Instead of celebrating how great he thinks he is, he needs to humble himself and pray, like David, for God to create a "clean heart" and to renew a "right spirit" (Psalm 51).

In other words, the Pharisee needs to be more like the tax collector! Isn't that a switch? The message of this parable about how to pray from the right perspective, is that it begins in the heart. We have already been reminded that it is what "comes out of the heart" that makes us clean or unclean! The tax collector realizes that it is not about him (no need to celebrate oneself -- let others do that), but it's about his relationship with God. This is why Jesus concludes that "the tax collector, and not the Pharisee, was in the right with God when he went home" (v. 14). Our job is to humble ourselves (hard as it might be) -- it is God, not we ourselves, who can "make us great."

PRAYER

Thy will be done. I yield up everything.
 'The life is more than meat' -- then more than health;
 'The body more than raiment' -- then than wealth;
 The hairs I made not, thou art numbering.
 Thou art my life -- I the brook, thou the spring.
 Because thine eyes are open, I can see;
 Because thou art thyself, 'tis therefore I am me.

- from 'Diary of an Old Soul' by George MacDonald*



Any reflection on PERSPECTIVE must include a consideration of how God's perspective is different from ours. Isaiah speaks for God, explaining that God's thoughts and ways are high above ours:

"My thoughts," says the Lord, "are not like yours, and my ways are different from yours. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways and thoughts above yours." (Isaiah 55:8)

This is a way of saying that you cannot really measure how different they are -- no one can determine the exact beginning of heaven in order to measure how far it is above the earth. And even if you could, where on earth would you measure from? The top of the highest mountain? The depths of the deepest ocean?

This same Isaiah reminds us (in another place) that God's perspective is from a higher vantage than ours -- see Isaiah 40:21-23, where he asks if we have not heard what was revealed "from the beginning", if we don't understand what has been in place "from the foundations of the earth?" It is **God**, he says,

Who sits above the circle (the horizon) of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; it is He Who stretches out the heavens like [gauze] curtains and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in, Who brings dignitaries to nothing, Who makes the judges and rulers of the earth as chaos (emptiness, falsity, and futility). (Isaiah 40:22-23 Amplified)

Yet this same God became one of us... is in our midst... is involved in our lives. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16) to be our Saviour. God so loved us that sent Jesus to "become like his people in every way", so that "the people's sins would be forgiven" (Hebrews 2:17-18).



This is what makes God's perspective unique -- God alone can be "high and lifted up" (Is. 6:1) while at the same time "endure the suffering that should have been ours" (Is. 53:4). God, in Christ, is the Word that "already existed" (John 1:1) and the Word that "became flesh" (John 1:14). God, in Christ, is the "suffering servant" (Is. 49:6) but also the "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev. 19:16).

"Hallelujah! What a Saviour!"

Don't Get Choked By The Weeds

Matthew 13:24-30

Jesus told them another parable: "The Kingdom of heaven is like this. A man sowed good seed in his field. One night, when everyone was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. When the plants grew and the heads of grain began to form, then the weeds showed up. The man's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, it was good seed you sowed in your field; where did the weeds come from?' It was some enemy who did this,' he answered. 'Do you want us to go and pull up the weeds?' they asked him. (Matthew 13:24-28)

This is one of the many parables that Jesus used to describe the 'Kingdom of Heaven' (in Matthew), or the 'Kingdom of God' (in the other Gospels). Here, using the metaphor of wheat and the weeds growing together, he reminds us that good and evil co-exist. But wait... this is a parable about his kingdom, right? How does evil (weeds) get in? Who allows weeds to grow among the wheat?

In this sense the Kingdom of heaven is representative of life itself -- right and wrong find themselves together, just and unjust co-exist, good and evil occupy the same space. Since everyone is welcomed into the Kingdom, it should not surprise us that some will want to enter even if they are not in full agreement with what the King wants. Not everyone will be an obedient subject. There will always be some who think they can play by their own rules and still win the game.

The point of this parable is about who judges the right or wrong... who determines 'wheat' and 'weeds'... who decides who stays in the Kingdom? Jesus gives his answer in verse 30: "at harvest time, I will tell the reapers" what to do. It is not our role to judge, or to 'pull up' the weeds -- God will take care of them. Our job is to grow, to bear fruit, to be faithful, to be persistent in spite of the opposition or the challenge. We press on, we follow our Master, we obey our Lord, we serve our King.

PRAYER

Almighty God, Lord of all, we pray that the Spirit of Jesus may bring faith and hope and love to all mankind.

We pray for the church, the company of believers through whom Jesus can make his power and mercy known and available to men and women today. We pray that our discipleship may make our Master known, not hide him from view.

- Contemporary Prayers for Church and School

**Patience,
Persistence,
and Perspiration**
make an unbeatable
combination for success.

{Napoleon Hill}

GET HEALTHY

Look Out For The Little Ones

Matthew 18:10-14

“See that you don't despise any of these little ones. Their angels in heaven, I tell you, are always in the presence of my Father in heaven.

“What do you think a man does who has one hundred sheep and one of them gets lost? He will leave the other ninety-nine grazing on the hillside and go and look for the lost sheep. When he finds it, I tell you, he feels far happier over this one sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not get lost. In just the same way your Father in heaven does not want any of these little ones to be lost. (Matthew 18:10-14)

Maybe you've heard the old expression: “There's a special place in God's heart for fools and little children.” Jesus certainly demonstrated his concern for the little ones:

- he scolded his disciples for trying to keep them away from him;
- he told us we have to be like little children in order to enter his Kingdom;
- he warns us of our fate if we mistreat his children.

And here he tells us not to “despise any of these little ones” because our Father in heaven does not want them “to be lost.” When we considered this parable earlier (on Day 7) we looked at it from our point of view, as sheep who sometimes wander off. Now we consider it from the perspective of the shepherd who has the responsibility for caring for the sheep. He has to pay special attention to the lamb who is lost, and do everything he can to bring him back to the fold.

I love the story of the little boy whose father told him a version of this story before bed one night, explaining that the sheep went through a hole in the fence. When the story was over, the little boy had only one question: “Did they fix the fence?”

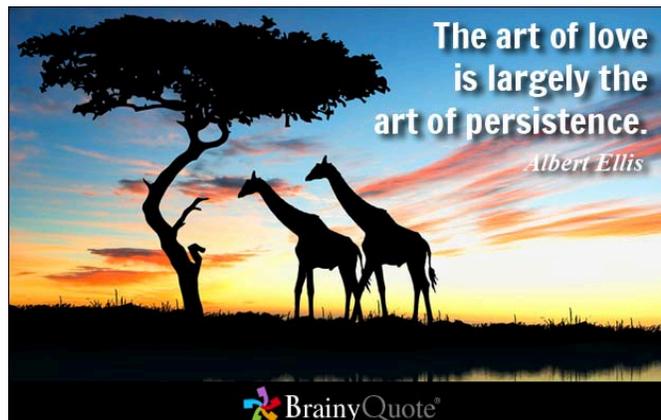
As ‘shepherds’ (parents, teachers, church members, persons who have influence over the little ones), do we care for the sheep, especially the lambs? Have we plugged the ‘holes’ that might tempt them to wander away? Are they safe with us?

PRAYER

Help us to help each other, Lord,
each other's cross to bear;
Let each, our friendly aid afford,
and feel our brother's care.

Help us to build each other up,
our little stock improve;
Increase our faith, confirm our hope,
and perfect us in love.

- Charles Wesley (Hymn 717)



Forgiveness Requires Forgiveness

Matthew 18:23-35

When the other servants saw what had happened, they were very upset and went to the king and told him everything. So he called the servant in. 'You worthless slave!' he said. 'I forgave you the whole amount you owed me, just because you asked me to. You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you.' (Matthew 18:31-33)

Here is the classic "do what I say, not what I do" scenario! The servant who is forgiven his entire debt because he asked his master to be patient with him, is unwilling to be patient with a fellow-servant. He happily accepts the forgiveness he requested, but defiantly denies the same forgiveness to someone else in response to their request. This hypocrisy is severely condemned by Jesus.

The lesson from the parable is, "You should have had mercy on your fellow-servant, just as I had mercy on you." Whenever we pray The Lord's Prayer, this is what we ask God for: "forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us" (see Matthew 6:12). We know this is the right way, but our selfish nature often rebels against it. We know this is what God expects, but we usually try to get around it. If we are unwilling to offer forgiveness, we should be just as reluctant to receive forgiveness.

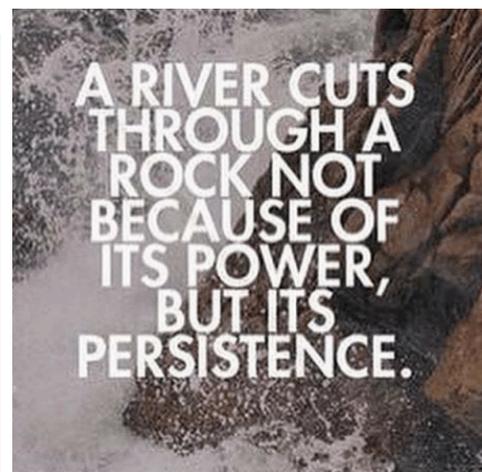
"It's not easy," we say. Duh! You think it's easy for God? Being willing to let go of hurts, disappointments and mistreatment is never easy. But our persistence in doing the right thing is not motivated or nourished by how we *feel*... rather, by what is *right*. And God is our example. We see this in its most potent expression when Jesus -- hanging on the cross, a few minutes away from death -- looks over the crowd and prays, "Forgive them, Father! They don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

God forgives, and persists in asking us to do likewise. Not because it's easy, but because it's right!

PRAYER

Keep me from wrath, let it seem ever so right:
my wrath will never work Thy righteousness.
Up, up the hill, to the whiter than snow-shine,
help me to climb, and dwell in pardon's light.
I must be pure as Thou, or even less
than Thy design of me -- therefore incline
my heart to take man's wrongs
as Thou takest mine.

- from 'Diary of an Old Soul' by George MacDonald*



Better Pay Attention!

Matthew 22:1-10

Once there was a king who prepared a wedding feast for his son. He sent his servants to tell the invited guests to come to the feast, but they did not want to come. So he sent other servants with this message for the guests: ‘My feast is ready now; my steers and prize calves have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast!’ But the invited guests paid no attention and went about their business: one went to his farm, another to his store, while others grabbed the servants, beat them, and killed them. (Matthew 22:2-6)

The events of this parable were completely in accordance with normal Jewish customs, William Barclay reminds us. “When the invitations to a great feast, like a wedding feast, were sent out the time was not stated; and when everything was ready and prepared, then the servants were sent out with a final summons to tell the guests to come. So, then, the king in this parable had long ago sent out his invitations; but it was not till everything was ready and prepared that the final summons to attend was issued -- and insultingly refused.”†

We should learn from these invited guests how not to respond to God’s grace:

- ♦ do not think of Christianity as “a gloomy giving up of everything which brings laughter and sunshine and happy fellowship”†;
- ♦ do not let good choices keep us from the best choice -- we should not “be so busy with the things of time that we forget the things of eternity”†;
- ♦ do not discount God’s grace -- we are invited only because of the “wide-armed, open-hearted, generous hospitality of the king”†.

PRAYER

Father, work your love in the Church, particularly where there is any hardness of heart, or misunderstanding of your will.

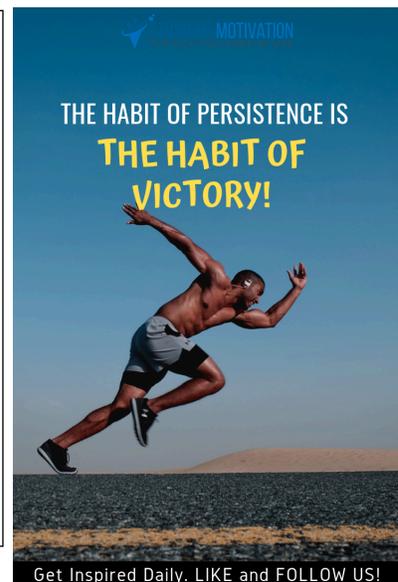
Father, work your love in our homes, making them places of welcome, understanding and forgiveness.

Father, work your love in all areas of pain and illness, anxiety and imprisonment.

Father, work your love in all areas of sadness and loneliness, hopelessness and doubt.

Father, work your love in all that is beautiful, all that is growing, and all that touches our hearts with joy.

- Susan Sayers



† William Barclay *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew Volume 2*, pp. 294-296

The Father Who Never Stopped Looking

Luke 15:11-32

“So he got up and started back to his father. He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with pity, and he ran, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him. ‘Father,’ the son said, ‘I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son.’ But the father called to his servants. ‘Hurry!’ he said. ‘Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Then go and get the prize calf and kill it, and let us celebrate with a feast! For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.’ And so the feasting began. (Luke 15:20-24)

We looked at this parable on Day 9, from the perspective of the son who ‘was lost’ but found his way home. Today we look at it from the perspective of the father, who kept a daily watch, waiting anxiously for his son to return. This son, who got lost trying to find himself, eventually “came to his senses” (verse 17), swallowed his pride, and made the effort to get back where he belonged. Note that the scripture doesn’t say he ‘went home’ -- it says he started back “to his father” (verse 20).

This father was persistent in his love for this wayward son. I think it would be a stretch to say that coincidentally he just happened to choose the right day to look down the road to see his son in the distance. I think it’s more likely that he was out every day... relentlessly and lovingly looking up and down, back and forth, hither and yon. After all, this parable is meant to remind us of God’s love for us. In this metaphor of a father’s compassion for his ‘lost’ son we see the depths of God’s love, the abundance of God’s grace, and the persistence with which God looks out for his children. George Matheson captures some of this in his hymn:

O love that wilt not let me go... O Light that followest all my way...
O Joy that seekest me through pain... O Cross that liftest up my head... (Hymn 448)

PRAYER

Lord, I know not what I ought to ask of You;
You alone know what I need... I simply present
myself before You, I open my heart to You.
Behold my needs which I know not myself.
Smite, or heal; depress me, or raise me up;
I adore all Your purposes without knowing them;
I am silent;
I offer myself in sacrifice; I yield myself to You;
I have no other desire than to accomplish Your will.
Teach me to pray. Pray Yourself in me. Amen.

- Francois Fénelon



Fruitful Branch... OR Firewood?

John 15:1-10

“I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me. Those who do not remain in me are thrown out like a branch and dry up; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, where they are burned.” (John 15:5-6)

These words, written by Charles de Foucauld (in *Meditations of a Hermit*) point us in the right direction:

We should try to be so closely united to Our Lord that we reproduce his life in our own, that our thoughts and words and actions should proclaim his teaching, so that he reigns in us, lives in us. He so often enters within us in Holy Communion. May his Kingdom reign in us.*

The point Jesus is making in this parable is: his disciples must not follow from a distance, but must be grafted to him... “abide in me,” he says... “remain united to me” he instructs, for “you can do nothing without me,” he warns.

This metaphor of branches growing out of, while remaining connected to, the Vine reminds us that our relationship with Christ is dynamic. In this relationship we are either growing or we are dying... we are productive or we are a hindrance... we will bring glory to our Father with our fruit, or we will be thrown out and dry up.

Our persistent, consistent abiding in the Vine is what produces fruit... “remain in my love,” instructs Jesus. And how do we accomplish that?

If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love” (verse 10).

PRAYER

Gracious God, thank you for your willingness to love us, and for your patience in teaching us how to love you.

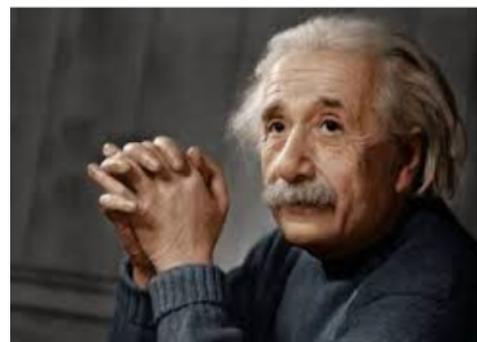
Help us to stay connected, so that we can be nourished and strengthened by all that you supply. May we bear good fruit that the Vine will be proud to claim, and that others will be glad to know.

Help us to benefit from the pruning of the Gardener so that we might bear more fruit to His glory.

Amen.

*It's not that I'm so
smart.
It's just that
**I stay with problems
longer.***

Albert Einstein (1879-1955)



In his classic work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer expounds on the truth that while salvation is free, discipleship will cost us our lives. "The cross is laid on every Christian," he said, which means that when "Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."¹ In answer to the question 'how is the disciple to know what kind of cross is meant for him?' Bonhoeffer answers: "He will find out as soon as he begins to follow his Lord and to share his life." And he goes on to explain:

Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master. Following Christ means *passio passiva*, suffering because we have to suffer. . . . If we refuse to take up our cross and submit to suffering and rejection at the hands of men, we forfeit our fellowship with Christ and have ceased to follow him. But if we lose our lives in his service and carry our cross, we shall find our lives again in the fellowship of the cross with Christ.²

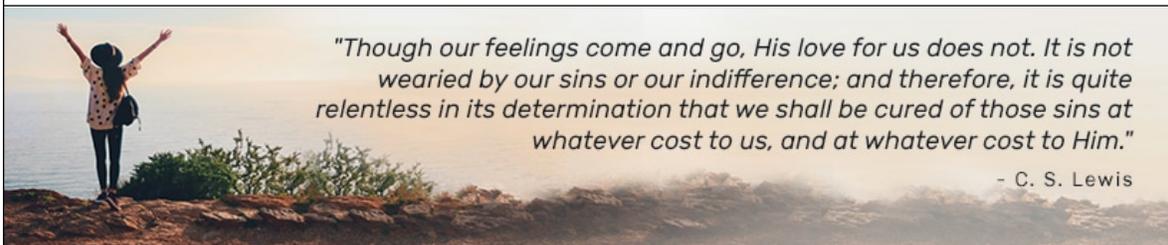
Bonhoeffer knew of what he spoke. Captured by the Nazis and put in prison, and later the Flossenbürg concentration camp, he faithfully carried his cross as he was persecuted for his faith. He was among those accused of being associated with the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, and, after a quick trial, was hanged on 9th April 1945, at the age of 39.

His persistence was encouraged and strengthened by his belief that just as Christ maintained his communion with the Father by his endurance, so his followers are to maintain their communion with Christ by their endurance.³

Our endurance is expressed in our persistence -- whatever the situation we have to be consistent in our faith and in our obedience, never mind how we feel. This is how St. Paul explained it in his testimony to the believers at Philippi:

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.
(Philippians 3:12-14 NIV)

God's love is Unconditional, Unrelenting & Unending



"Though our feelings come and go, His love for us does not. It is not wearied by our sins or our indifference; and therefore, it is quite relentless in its determination that we shall be cured of those sins at whatever cost to us, and at whatever cost to Him."

- C. S. Lewis

Your Light Must Shine

Matthew 5:14-16 / Mark 4:21-25

“You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead it is put on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)

The description of this ‘simple, common subject’ of shining light is used to illustrate the ‘deep, valuable moral lesson’ of a how life committed to loving and serving God should look. Jesus uses this metaphor to teach the truth: the purpose for light is that it shines -- no one lights a lamp and then hides it -- so that it can illuminate. Jesus wants his followers to understand that the reason the light of God’s love and grace was given to us is so that it can shine through us.

Jesus, the Word, “was the source of life, and this life brought light to people” (John 1:4). Jesus, who describes himself as the “Light of the world,” declares that his followers “will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness” (John 8:12). He also describes his followers as “like light for the world” (Matthew 5:14).

We can understand ‘light’ in several different ways:

- (i) the light that dispels *ignorance* -- in Jesus we know more of God;
- (ii) the light that dispels *darkness* -- we are no longer ‘blinded’ by sin;
- (iii) the light that illuminates our *path* (see Psalm 119:105);
- (iv) the light that illuminates the *truth* (see John 8:31-32).

The parallel passage in the Gospel of Mark expands a bit, incorporating some other things Jesus said elsewhere in Matthew -- see 7:1-2, and 10:26-27. But the central message is not lost: ***When Christ shines in you, he must also shine through you!***

PRAYER

Lord, the light of your love is shining,
 in the midst of the darkness, shining;
 Jesus, Light of the world, shine upon us,
 set us free by the truth you now bring us... Shine on me.
Shine, Jesus, shine -- fill this land with the Father's glory;
Blaze, Spirit, blaze -- set our hearts on fire.
Flow, river flow -- flood the nations with grace and mercy,
Send forth your Word, Lord, and let there be light!

- Graham Kendrick



Do you recharge yourself
 as much as you recharge
 your phone?

Same Seed. . . Different Soil

Mark 4:1-20 / Matthew 13:1-23

Some people are like the seeds that fall along the path; as soon as they hear the message, Satan comes and takes it away. Other people are like the seeds that fall on rocky ground. As soon as they hear the message, they receive it gladly but it does not sink deep into them, and they don't last long. So when trouble or persecution comes because of the message, they give up at once. Other people are like the seeds sown among the thorn bushes. These are the ones who hear the message, but the worries about this life, the love for riches, and all other kinds of desires crowd in and choke the message, and they don't bear fruit. But other people are like seeds sown in good soil. They hear the message, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirty, some sixty, and some one hundred.” (Mark 4:15-20)

In this parable Jesus reminds us of what we already know... even though we share a lot in common, we are also different. This is true of our spiritual lives as well as our physical, emotional and intellectual lives. Spiritually we may see things differently, we may be motivated by different drivers, we may have different callings and ministries. Our differences are represented by the various types of 'ground' in the parable. What is the same, what we have in common, is that the 'seed' of the Good News of the gospel is the same for all of us.

What we see is that the environment plays a role in how we respond to the offer of God's grace. If we are not in an environment that is conducive to love, care, concern, or if we have no interest in changing our lives, the message hardly penetrates. Some may hear and respond, but do not nurture their growth in the relationship with Christ, so the seed doesn't grow. Others respond enthusiastically, but circumstances of life discourage or distract or disappoint them, and they "don't bear fruit."

Those who bear fruit are those who not only hear the message, they also accept it, and they nurture the relationship (as Branches abiding in the Vine) so that they are strengthened. The message here is that while God will take care of 'sowing the seed' and will raise up servants to proclaim the Good News, we share in the responsibility of being "good soil" -- we must do whatever we can to cultivate an environment in which we can grow and mature and bear fruit to God's glory.

PRAYER

Through words written long ago and still true today,
 I AM, He says;
 YOU ARE, we believe;
 HE IS, we tell the world:
 born once upon a time, but for ever at work among us;
 killed once upon a cross, but for ever alive to help us.

- Contemporary Prayers for Church and School



Little Seeds Grow Big Trees

Mark 4:30-34 / Matthew 13:31-32

“What shall we say the Kingdom of God is like?” asked Jesus. “What parable shall we use to explain it? It is like this. A man takes a mustard seed, the smallest seed in the world, and plants it in the ground. After a while it grows up and becomes the biggest of all plants. It puts out such large branches that the birds come and make their nests in its shade.” (Mark 4:30-32)

Some people get hung up on the technicalities... so let's dispense with them right away. No, the mustard seed is not “the smallest seed in the world,” but it was smallest of seeds known in Palestine during Jesus' time. So consider this a figure of speech rather than a scientific fact! Neither does the mustard seed grow to become “the biggest of all plants,” but, again, it was among the largest shrubs that they knew in this part of the world. So, Jesus, like many speakers, used *hyperbole* (“exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally” *dictionary.com*): he was making the point that what started out extremely small would end up very big! In other parts of the world, where they have such trees, one might say, “See how the little acorn grows into a mighty oak!”

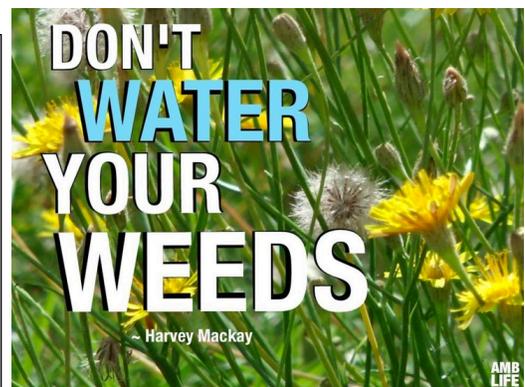
This is how the Kingdom of God works... from a small beginning it grows and mushrooms into a large community of believers. We can't see what is going on beneath the ground but we know that the soil, combined with the sunshine and the rain is producing! In the same way, we can't see or understand how the Holy Spirit works, but we see the results -- just as a little seed becomes a large tree -- the Kingdom expands and grows and is being fulfilled.

What we (in this part of the world at this point in time) would miss in this parable is the meaning of the statement, “the birds come and make their nests in its shade,” but Jesus' audience would connect with it. In their eastern culture at the time, this was a metaphor used to describe the power and authority of those kingdoms that had others coming to surrender and/or seek refuge. This may be Jesus' way of saying that this seed, while planted among the Jews, would grow into a tree that would attract people from all nations.

PRAYER

Lord God, creator and redeemer, claim my life and ministry for your high and holy purpose. Help me to remain faithful and steadfast all day long, and when evening comes grant a peaceful rest in your presence.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.*



Invisible But Effective

Matthew 13:33-35

Jesus told them still another parable: “The Kingdom of heaven is like this. A woman takes some yeast and mixes it with a bushel of flour until the whole batch of dough rises.”

Jesus used parables to tell all these things to the crowds; he would not say a thing to them without using a parable. He did this to make come true what the prophet had said,

“I will use parables when I speak to them;
I will tell them things unknown since the creation of the world.”

(Matthew 13:33-35)

Jesus continues to teach about the Kingdom of God -- in the gospel of Matthew it is called *the Kingdom of heaven* -- with another parable. A similar message is being given in both parables, that of the mustard seed (which we looked at yesterday), and that of the yeast in the dough. It is that while we do not always see how the Spirit is working in the kingdom, we should always see results in the citizens.

As John MacArthur comments:

Small things can have, ultimately, very large effects. All music, all symphonies, concertos, oratorios, hymns, songs, all music basically comes from eight notes. All the profound words that have been ever been uttered or written in the English language come from 26 letters. Small beginnings; profound, extensive results.

(www.reformedbaptistblog.com)

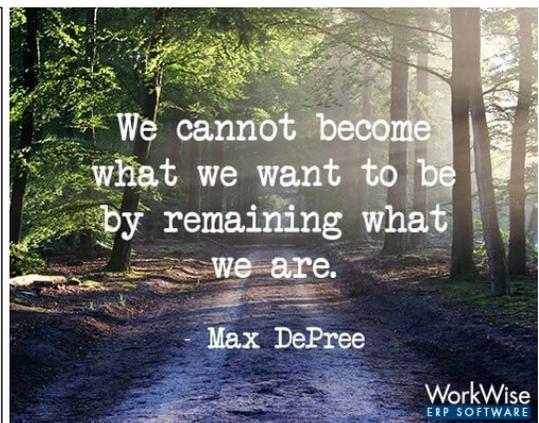
This is how the Kingdom works... like yeast in the dough, where a small amount transforms the whole batch of flour. Yeast interacts with liquid and sugar and ferments, producing gas. This is what make the dough ‘rise’ and the molecular structure is changed. Kingdom citizens should also be transformed, our spiritual structure changed, so that we become more and more like Christ.

PRAYER

Gracious God, strengthen our faith in the One who is

invisible but present,
eternal but temporal,
powerful yet gentle,
divine while being human...

Renew our faith in Jesus the Christ, who bought us with a price, and makes us His own.



Words Versus Actions

Matthew 21:28-32

Now, what do you think? There was once a man who had two sons. He went to the older one and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' 'I don't want to,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. 'Yes, sir,' he answered, but he did not go. Which one of the two did what his father wanted?"

"The older one," they answered.

So Jesus said to them, "I tell you: the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you. For John the Baptist came to you showing you the right path to take, and you would not believe him; but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. Even when you saw this, you did not later change your minds and believe him.

(Matthew 21:28-32)

Here in this parable Jesus talks in 'twos' -- first, a man who had two sons:

- 1 - the older son, who said he did not want to work in the vineyard, "but later he changed his mind and went"
- 2 - the younger son, who said he would work in the vineyard, "but he did not go"

He refers to two categories of people:

- (i) the "chief priests and elders" (see Matthew 21:23)
- (ii) the "tax collectors and prostitutes" (verses 31 and 32)

And he teaches two very significant truths:

- a) what you do is more important than what you say (see Matthew 7:21)
- b) one of God's greatest gifts to us is the opportunity to **change our mind**, as He can (see Amos 7:3-6)

We should not be so spiritually arrogant that we cannot change our mind when we discover we are wrong, or when we learn something new, or when we are shown "the right path to take." Faith is the beginning, but productivity is proof of our growth.

PRAYER

Gracious God, we pray for those we rely on and those who rely on us;
 for an increase of loyalty and trust;
 for guidance in the way we use our time,
 money and abilities;
 for courage to commit our lives to you more deeply.

Amen.

- Susan Sayers

YOU CAN DO
anything
 BUT NOT
everything

Bear Fruit -- Don't Waste Your Space

Luke 13:6-9

Then Jesus told them this parable: "There was once a man who had a fig tree growing in his vineyard. He went looking for figs on it but found none. So he said to his gardener, 'Look, for three years I have been coming here looking for figs on this fig tree, and I haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it go on using up the soil?' But the gardener answered, 'Leave it alone, sir, just one more year; I will dig around it and put in some fertilizer. Then if the tree bears figs next year, so much the better; if not, then you can have it cut down.'" (Luke 13:6-9)

When you have fruit trees because you want the fruit, and the trees don't bear fruit... what do you do? You cut them down, dig the roots out, and plant something else. That's what the owner of the vineyard wanted to do -- the fig tree was not productive, it was just "using up the soil." This is reminiscent of the parable of the Vine and the Branches, where Jesus (the true Vine) says that his Father (the Gardener) "breaks off every branch that does not bear fruit."

But in this parable the gardener does not cut down the barren tree... rather he suggests to the owner that the fig tree be given another chance. He offers to "dig around it and put in some fertilizer" in an effort to help it produce the fruit that the owner is looking for.

God our Father functions in both gardener roles -- He is the Judge who will "break off the branches" that don't bear fruit, as He is also the Saviour who gives us all another chance. This is how Peter expressed it:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

PRAYER

Gracious God,
 We pray for integrity and wisdom in all who advise and lead in our world; we pray for the areas where law and order have broken down.
 We praise and bless you for every scrap of tenderness, every spark of joy, and every glimpse of your glory.
 Fill us afresh with your goodness and love.
 Amen.

- Susan Sayers



Almost everything will
 work again if
 you unplug it for
 a few minutes ...
 including you.
 -Anne Lamott

www.west.coach

O Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end;
 Be Thou forever near me, my Master and my Friend;
 I shall not fear the battle if Thou art by my side,
 Nor wander from the pathway if Thou wilt be my Guide.+

My friends, what good is it for one of you to say that you have faith if your actions do not prove it? Can that faith save you? Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. What good is there in your saying to them, "God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!"—if you don't give them the necessities of life? So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead. (James 2:14-17)

Saviour, Thy dying love Thou gavest me,
 Nor should I aught withhold, dear Lord, from Thee:
 In love my soul would bow, my heart fulfill its vow,
 Some offering bring Thee now, something for Thee.

Give me a faithful heart, likeness to Thee,
 That each departing day henceforth may see
 Some work of love begun, some deed of kindness done,
 Some wanderer sought and won, something for Thee.*

But someone will say, "One person has faith, another has actions." My answer is, "Show me how anyone can have faith without actions. I will show you my faith by my actions." (James 2:18)

A charge to keep I have, a God to glorify,
 A never-dying soul to save and fit it for the sky.
 To serve the present age, my calling to fulfill;
 O may it all my powers engage to do my Master's will.♦

You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone... As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. (James 2:24, 26)

O Jesus, Thou hast promised to all who follow Thee
 That where Thou art in glory there shall Thy servant be;
 And Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end;
 Oh, give me grace to follow, my Master and my Friend.+

Abc

Matthew 18:23-35

Then the man went out and met one of his fellow servants who owed him a few dollars. He grabbed him and started choking him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he said. His fellow servant fell down and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!' But he refused; instead, he had him thrown into jail until he should pay the debt. . . The king was very angry, and he sent the servant to jail to be punished until he should pay back the whole amount. (Matthew 18:28-30, 34)

We considered this parable on Day 19, when we looked at it from the servant's perspective -- he should have learned from his master's example, and forgiven his fellow-servants just as his master forgave him. Let's now consider this parable from the perspective of the consequences of our actions.

The implication is that we are punished when we do not follow God's way. Interestingly, the punishment that the master meted out to the servant ("jail until he should pay back the whole amount") was the same punishment the servant was willing to impose upon his fellow-servant. This echoes what we heard in another parable -- the parable on judgment, which we considered on Day 11 -- as expressed in Matthew 7:2:

**For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged,
and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.**

So, since we know that there are consequences to our actions, we must keep this in mind. The lesson to learn here is that we should be sure to do what is right and fair and just, because we will be treated the same we treat others. Or, as Jesus said in another place: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31).

PRAYER

For Thou art making me, I think Thee Sire.
What Thou has done and doest, Thou knowest well;
And I will help Thee: gently in Thy fire
I will lie burning; on Thy potter's wheel
I will whirl patient, though my brain should reel;
Thy grace will be enough my grief to quell,
And growing strength perfect thorough weakness dire.

- Hannah Whitall Smith*

**All pain is a
punishment, and every
punishment is inflicted
for love as much as for
justice.**

QUOTEHD.COM

Joseph De Maistre
French Diplomat

You Don't Know When, So Watch! Matthew 24:45-51 / Mark 13:34-37

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 24:45-51)

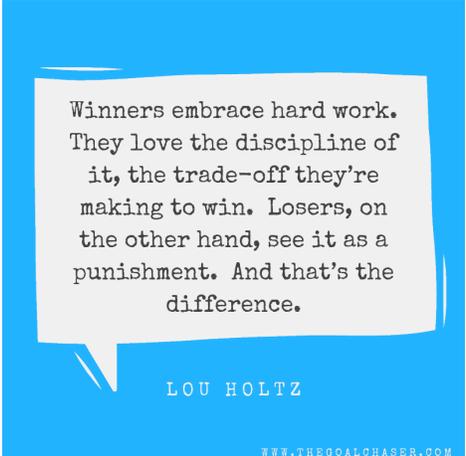
In this parable quoted here from the gospel of Matthew, the punishment for the wicked servant is described in gory detail. I don't think this is to be taken literally, that the servant will actually be dismembered! Rather it is a figure of speech that indicates the disruption of the servant's life, the dislocation of his priorities, and the warped values he demonstrates. This is what makes him 'wicked' and earns him "a place with the hypocrites." The definition of 'hypocrite' is:

a person who pretends to have virtues, moral or religious beliefs, principles, etc., that he or she does not actually possess, especially a person whose actions belie stated beliefs. - www.dictionary.com

The wicked servant 'pretended' and as a result his place is with those who are two-faced, those who speak with a 'forked-tongue,' those who can't be trusted. In the version of this parable in the gospel of Mark there is no express punishment for the watchman and servants not being alert and ready for the master's return. It seems the punishment is in the shame and guilt they will feel for not pleasing the master. Both 'punishments' -- described and implied -- would be hard to accept and difficult to live with.

PRAYER

Gracious God,
 Forgive us for our shallowness,
 our weakness,
 our hypocrisy,
 Guide us with Your wisdom,
 strengthen us by Your power,
 fill us with Your grace,
 that we may truly reflect who You truly are.
 Amen.



I Don't Know You

Matthew 25:1-13

At that time the Kingdom of heaven will be like this. Once there were ten young women who took their oil lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and the other five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any extra oil with them, while the wise ones took containers full of oil for their lamps. The bridegroom was late in coming, so they began to nod and fall asleep... But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.
 (Matthew 25:1-5, 10)

Here the 'punishment' for those who did not bring extra oil, and were locked out of the wedding feast when the bridegroom arrived because they were missing, is that they were disowned by the bridegroom. When they returned and pleaded for him to open the door for them, he replied, "Truly, I tell you, I don't know you" (verse 12).

This echoes what Jesus said at another time about entering his kingdom:

"Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' "But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'
 (Luke 13:24-25)

What a serious punishment this is... to be disowned by God. But it is the punishment those who are not faithful and alert can expect. Our relationship with God does not consist of an occasional 'get-together' or a casual 'hook-up'. It is a constant abiding, a staying connected, a consistent growing and maturing. Or it is not!

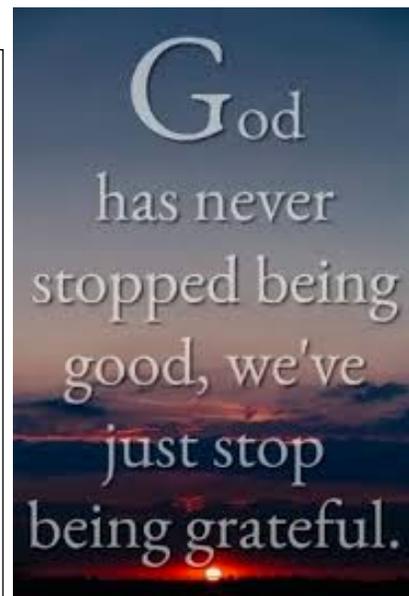
PRAYER

We thank you, Father, that through Jesus Christ your Son those who seek you may find you. What you have made true for all we ask you to make true in the experience of each. May all who set out on the royal road come to the king's presence: through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

- Contemporary Prayers for Church and School

"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

(Luke 9:61-62)



When You Take The Lazy Way Out

Matthew 25:14-30

At that time the Kingdom of heaven will be like this. Once there was a man who was about to leave home on a trip; he called his servants and put them in charge of his property. He gave to each one according to his ability: to one he gave five thousand gold coins, to another he gave two thousand, and to another he gave one thousand. Then he left on his trip. The servant who had received five thousand coins went at once and invested his money and earned another five thousand. In the same way the servant who had received two thousand coins earned another two thousand. But the servant who had received one thousand coins went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master's money. (Matthew 25:14-18)

Some commentaries on this passage allege that this is Jesus' endorsement of capitalism, and encouragement to always put profit first. I think it is more an endorsement of hard work, and the willingness to commit ourselves to serving. Using the metaphor of money ('talents' in the King James Version) Jesus is actually talking about working for the kingdom rather than for one's own enrichment. It is, after all, the master's money that is being left with the servants to manage. They are **stewards**, committed to use what has been entrusted to them to maximum benefit.

This is the point of the parable: Stewards manage the master's resources for the master's benefit. We are stewards, since God owns everything, and we use the resources God gives us for God's benefit, and (if God chooses) for our blessing.

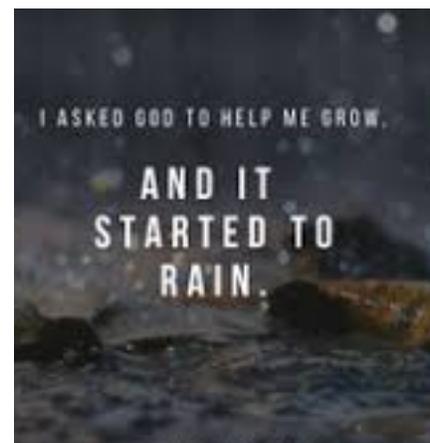
While the two servants who gained a profit earned their master's praise, the one who did nothing (he hid the money in the ground) was punished. His punishment was two-fold: the little he had was taken away from him (verses 28-29), and he was thrown outside in the darkness (verse 30). To be deprived of blessings and 'in the dark' are the results of mishandling the master's resources... of being poor stewards.

PRAYER

We pray for the Church as it witnesses to Christ in the world; may its members be always aware that they are called to be servants, ready and happy to minister to the spiritual, emotional and physical needs of all people.

We pray that governments will reflect the values of responsible caring, compassion and integrity, so that no individual or minority group is abused or left out.

- Susan Sayers



Not Requested. . . But Required!

Luke 12:41-48

The servant who knows what his master wants him to do, but does not get himself ready and do it, will be punished with a heavy whipping. But the servant who does not know what his master wants, and yet does something for which he deserves a whipping, will be punished with a light whipping. Much is required from the person to whom much is given; much more is required from the person to whom much more is given.

(Luke 12:47-48 J B Phillips)

This is a parallel version of the parable we considered on Day 30, but in this version from the gospel of Luke we find the lesson expressed in a unique way. The whole point of this story, Jesus seems to say, is to learn this truth:

Much will be expected from the one who has been given much, and the more a man is trusted, the more people will expect of him.

(Luke 12:48 J B Phillips)

Or, as it this verse is rendered in *The Message*:

Great gifts mean great responsibilities; greater gifts, greater responsibilities!

The more God can trust us, then, the more God expects from us. The greater the gifts we receive from God, the more God requires us to give. Our responsibility is proportionate to our gifts and the resources we have. And, likewise, our punishment is also proportionate -- it's more severe for ignoring God, and less severe if we are ignorant of God's will. The greater punishment is given for knowing what the master wants and not doing it, than for not knowing and being a poor steward as a result. Our accountability as stewards is measured by how faithful and how obedient we are in keeping God's commands:

The servant who knows the master's will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows.

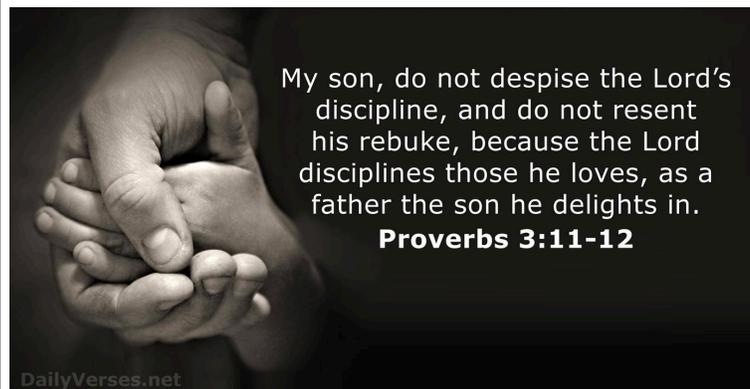
(verse 47 NIV)

Those 'blows' might be disappointments, frustrations, denials... they might be in the form of failures, losses, griefs... or manifested in shame, guilt, regret... They likely will be the punishment we most wish we didn't have to endure.

PRAYER

Make me a captive, Lord,
and then I shall be free;
Force me to render up my sword,
and I shall conqueror be.
I sink in life's alarms
when by myself I stand;
Imprison me within Thine arms,
and strong shall be my stand.

- George Matheson *



Blind Leaders of The Blind

Matthew 15:10-20

Then the disciples came to him and said, "Do you know that the Pharisees had their feelings hurt by what you said?"

"Every plant which my Father in heaven did not plant will be pulled up," answered Jesus. "Don't worry about them! They are blind leaders of the blind; and when one blind man leads another, both fall into a ditch." (Matthew 15:12-14)

We considered this parable previously (on Day 1) and concluded that Jesus was emphasizing the need for our hearts to be right with God, for it's what in our hearts that "will come out in our attitudes, in our value system, and in our behaviour." Here we see that Jesus also take a jab at the Pharisees when he calls them 'blind leaders of the blind' indicating that they and those they lead will "both fall into a ditch" (verse 14).

He explains to his questioning disciples that the Pharisees (who were offended by what he said) were 'plants' that his Father did not plant, and so they would be pulled up. It's Jesus' way of saying that the Pharisees were more of an annoyance than a threat... more like a pimple than a problem. As long as they were ignored, and not given any attention, they would disappear. Those who paid attention and who followed them shared in their blindness, and they will all end up in the ditch!

As long as we realize that such self-righteous people who think themselves spiritually superior to others, are their own problem, not ours, then we have nothing to be concerned about. Rules, regulations, what you can and can't do, and what kind of spiritual 'straight-jacket' you must put yourself in -- these are the requirements of human systems. What God requires is not that we eat certain things, but that our hearts are right. So don't get carried away by the ridiculous demands of some people -- they will only lead you blindly -- and you will be punished by straying from the truth and falling into a ditch. Rather, focus on being a plant that God has planted, do that which will nourish your spiritual growth, and follow the Light of the World so that you don't stumble in darkness.

PRAYER

Lord, I do desire to come into harmony with you more fully and more often. I do desire a fellowship that is constant and sustaining. Please nurture this desire of mine, which seems so small and tentative right now. May I someday become like the trees, which are "planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do they prosper." (Psalm 1:3)

- Richard Foster

"There is no sense in punishing your future for the mistakes of your past. Forgive yourself, grow from it, and then let it go."

- Melanie Koulouris

In Hebrews 12:2-6 we read:

Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and he is now seated at the right side of God's throne.

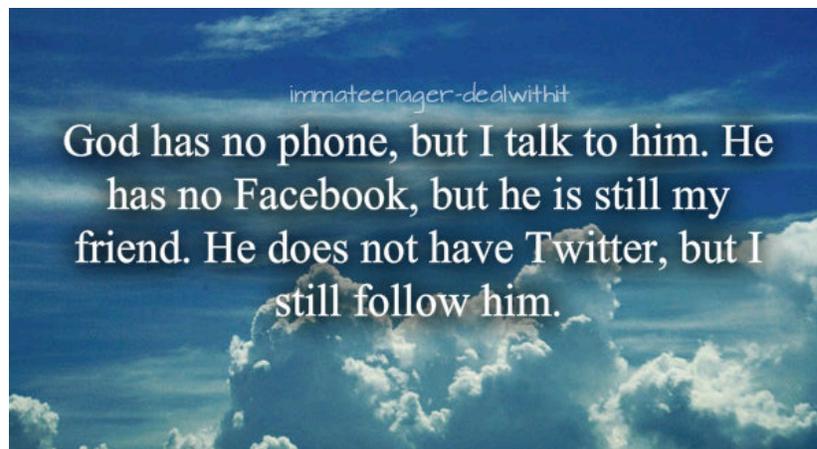
Think of what he went through; how he put up with so much hatred from sinners! So do not let yourselves become discouraged and give up. For in your struggle against sin you have not yet had to resist to the point of being killed. Have you forgotten the encouraging words which God speaks to you as his children?

My child, pay attention when the Lord corrects you,
and do not be discouraged when he rebukes you.

Because the Lord corrects everyone he loves,
and punishes everyone he accepts as a child. (see Proverbs 3:11-12)

It must be realized that the true sign of spiritual endeavour and the price of success in it is suffering. One who proceeds without suffering will bear no fruit. Do not, because of the suffering that accompanies them, cease to make painstaking efforts, lest you be condemned for fruitlessness and hear the words, 'Take the talent from him' (Matthew 25:28).

Every struggle in the soul's training, whether physical or mental, that is not accompanied by suffering, that does not require the utmost effort, will bear no fruit. . . Those who work feebly and carelessly may go through the movements of making great efforts, but they harvest no fruit, because they undergo no suffering.*



* Theophan the Recluse

United We Stand... Divided We Fall Matthew 12:24-30 / Mark 3:23-27

Jesus knew what they were thinking, and so he said to them, "Any country that divides itself into groups which fight each other will not last very long. And any town or family that divides itself into groups which fight each other will fall apart. So if one group is fighting another in Satan's kingdom, this means that it is already divided into groups and will soon fall apart!" (Matthew 12:25-26)

When a country is divided into groups that fight each other, we call it civil war. It is possible to have spiritual 'civil war' as well, which is what Jesus addresses in this parable. He uses several examples of groups divided within themselves: countries, towns, families, and those who share the same belief/faith. So, he concludes, "if one group is fighting another in Satan's kingdom, this means that it is already divided."

Using this negative example -- in response to the Pharisees' accusation that his power to drive out demons comes from the ruler of the demons -- Jesus is making a positive point: The strength of the kingdom of God lies in the unity it demonstrates. The Pharisees, trying to discredit Jesus, accuse him of deceit and hypocrisy. I'm sure that got a chuckle from Jesus, who had several times accused the Pharisees of the same!

The lesson Jesus is teaching his followers is an important one for the survival and growth of his kingdom: all sorts and conditions of people will join the kingdom (no one who believes is denied entry) so we have to be able to get along. There has to be unity displayed in the midst of the diversity. The things we have in common must outweigh the differences we might have. Strength lies, not in *uniformity* (all looking alike), but in *unity* (all following the same master, in pursuit of the same goal).

To be strong we must "be completely humble and gentle; [and] patient, bearing with one another in love." We must "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:2-3)

PRAYER

Gracious God,
Remind us of the truth you teach in your word:
"Two people can resist an attack that would defeat one person alone. A rope made of three cords is hard to break."✧

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters... that there be no divisions among you, but you be perfectly united in mind and thought."♦

Strengthen us in that which unites us. Amen.

✧ Ecclesiastes 4:12 ♦ 1 Corinthians 1:10



I Am Sure They will Respect My Son Mark 12:1-12 / Matthew 21:33-45

Then Jesus spoke to them in parables: "Once there was a man who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a hole for the wine press, and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to tenants and left home on a trip.

The only one left to send was the man's own dear son. Last of all, then, he sent his son to the tenants. 'I am sure they will respect my son,' he said. (Mark 12:1, 6)

Jesus puts words in God's mouth, as it were, in this parable... he has God say, "I know they will respect my son" even when he knows those listening to him, and many more in time to come, will not. It is obvious that Jesus is speaking of himself (the son) and God his Father (owner of the vineyard). The Pharisees certainly got it -- "they knew he had told this parable against them" (verse 12).

Jesus appeals to his listeners' background, and their knowledge of scripture, when he refers to Psalm 118, verse 22, which speaks of the rejected stone becoming the head stone. On our side of history we understand this to be a prophecy concerning the Messiah, but in Jesus' day this would have been a reminder of the time when what was known as the Second Temple was being built -- Barclay explains:

A massive block had at first been rejected, but finally had been used to hold up the south-west corner of the outer wall to keep the whole edifice from sliding down into the valley of *Hinnom*. This latter name becomes *Gehenna* in the Greek of the New Testament. It was used as a rubbish dump and was always burning, so it gradually became an alternative word for what we call hell-fire. The corner stone, then, was to keep God's people from sliding down to hell! †

Jesus is the corner stone -- he is strong enough to keep his people; we must be strong enough to trust him. Our real power is in the One who has all power.

PRAYER

When the storms of life are raging, stand by me;
when the world is tossing me like a ship upon the sea,
Thou who rules wind and water, stand by me.
In the midst of tribulation, stand by me;
when the hosts of sin assail, and my strength begins
to fail, Thou who never lost a battle, stand by me.
In the midst of faults and failures, stand by me;
when I've done the best I can, and my friends
misunderstand, Thou who knowest all about me,
stand by me.

- Charles A. Tindley*

*"When the power
of love overcomes
the love of power,
the world will
know peace."*

- Jimi Hendrix

† William Barclay *The Daily Study Bible: Psalms Volume II*, p. 210

First Tie Up The Strong Man

Matthew 12:24-30 / Mark 3:23-27

No one can break into a strong man's house and take away his belongings unless he first ties up the strong man; then he can plunder his house.

Anyone who is not for me is really against me; anyone who does not help me gather is really scattering. (Matthew 12:29-30)

We revisit the parable we considered two days ago (Day 35), and look at the closing lines of Jesus... the conclusion he draws, which speaks about **power**. Claiming that it is "God's Spirit who gives me the power to drive out demons," Jesus is reminding his listeners that in order for that to happen, the 'strong man' (Satan) had to be bound. This image of taking from the strong comes from Isaiah 49:24-26, where God declares that captives will be liberated and plunder will be retrieved.

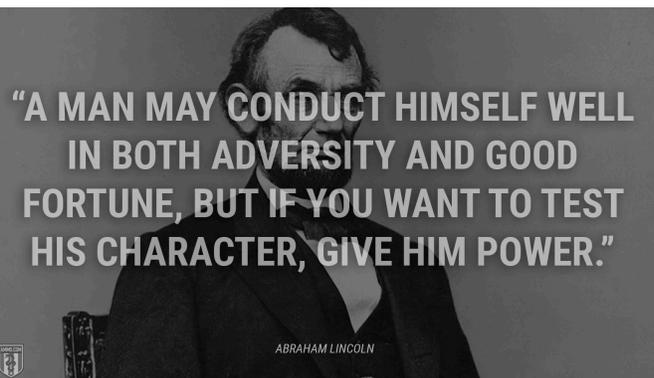
Barclay suggests that the 'strong man' was bound by Jesus when they faced each other in the wilderness and Jesus "conquered him." That was where, for the first time, Satan found someone whom not all his wiles could seduce, and whom not all his attacks could conquer. From that time henceforth the power of Satan has never been quite the same. He is no longer the all-conquering power of darkness; he is the defeated power of sin. The defences are breached; the enemy is not yet conquered; but his power can never be the same again, for Jesus can help others to win the victory which He Himself won.†

The lesson we have to learn from this parable is that we, too, must "first tie up the strong man" before we can see victory in our lives. We must, in the words of the old spiritual, "Shut de door! Keep out de devil!" so that we can open up to God's will and way. For most of us this is an ongoing activity, not just a one-time event. Jesus reminds us of this when he (again) uses a metaphor from agriculture: "Anyone who does not help me gather is really scattering" (verse 30). Keep on sowing, keep on tending the crops, keep on reaping, keep on gathering... when one 'strong man' is tied up, others are liberated to grow!

PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, you know what it is like to be human, yet you managed not to let pride and anger get the better of you: you were not greedy for power or praise. Touch our hearts with your Spirit, so that we may become like you. Give us grace so that we may show grace.

- Contemporary Prayers for Church and School



† William Barclay *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew Volume 2*, pp. 40-41

Relationship Between Generosity and Jealousy

Matthew 20:1-16

‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘while we put up with a whole day’s work in the hot sun—yet you paid them the same as you paid us!’ ‘Listen, friend,’ the owner answered one of them, ‘I have not cheated you. After all, you agreed to do a day’s work for one silver coin. Now take your pay and go home. I want to give this man who was hired last as much as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?’

And Jesus concluded, “So those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last.”

(Matthew 20:12-16)

The generosity of the owner of the vineyard is a demonstration of his power. He has the authority, and the funds, to be in the position to determine what he will give each of the labourers he hired. The expectation of those who were hired first is a demonstration of their weakness... they assumed that they deserved more, and would therefore receive more, than those who were hired last. They seemed to forget that they had agreed to work for the average day’s wage, which is what they were paid.

Power in this parable is not about strength, or ability, or muscle. It’s about justice and truth and generosity. The owner did not cheat anyone, nor did he deceive any of those he hired. But he did the unexpected -- he paid those who worked a short time just as much as he paid those who worked all day. This provoked the latter to complain, and prompted the owner’s question to them: “Are you jealous because I am generous?”

This is real power... that you can and will do the unexpected, give what is not deserved, go above and beyond... And not out of obligation, or because it’s expected, or to impress anyone. But out of generosity -- just the way God works:

It is a difficult thing for someone to die for a righteous person. It may even be that someone might dare to die for a good person. But God has shown us how much he loves us—it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us! (Romans 5:7-8)

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, sometimes we are like you were in the Garden, we’d like to let some cups pass...

When we sweat like blood, and are struggling, when we are under attack and feel abandoned, draw near through your Spirit to refresh us, revive us, and renew us.

We pray that, like you, we will be strong enough to accept God’s will, and be empowered to do it.

**POWER IS
DANGEROUS
UNLESS YOU HAVE
HUMILITY.**

Richard J. Daley

Like The Good Samaritan. . . Do The Right

Luke 10:29-37

And Jesus concluded, "In your opinion, which one of these three acted like a neighbor toward the man attacked by the robbers?"

The teacher of the Law answered, "The one who was kind to him."

Jesus replied, "You go, then, and do the same." (Luke 10:36-37)

Most of us know this parable well, having heard it since we were little, and having heard it many times. We understand clearly the point Jesus was making: do what you know is right with no regard for labels people place on you. Doing right does not depend on our nationality, our position, whatever others think of us... Others don't decide for us -- we decide for ourselves what we will do -- and we should do the right however challenging, difficult, painful or inconvenient it is. As God does. Marcus Dods reminds us of a time when God, although it was hard to do, did what was right:

"The purpose of God in the history of humanity was accomplished when Jesus breathed his last upon the cross. The cry 'It is finished' was not the mere gasp of a worn out life; it was not the cry of satisfaction with which a career of pain and sorrow is terminated; it was the deliberate utterance of a clear consciousness on the part of God's appointed Revealer that now all had been done that could be done to make God known to people and to identify him with humanity."*

God did what was right, even though it was painful. Jesus did what was right, even though it cost him his life. The Good Samaritan did what was right even though it was expensive. Jesus encourages his listeners to "do the same." We were reminded earlier through the experience of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Sun. 14.Mar), that **salvation is free... but discipleship will cost us our lives**. In the kingdom of God, the power to live victoriously comes in the willingness to give our life away -- see Matthew 16:25.

PRAYER

Almighty God,
 You who have sent Jesus into the world to suffer, die, and rise again for our sake, help us to experience your transforming power within our lives and ministry.
 We offer our prayers in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, our Lord.
 Amen.*

When
 you can't control
 what's happening,
 challenge yourself
 to control the
 way you respond
 to what's happening.
 That's where
 your power is!

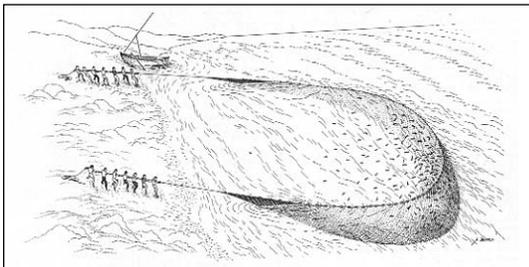
The Dragnet Catches All Kinds of Fish

Matthew 13:47-50

Also, the Kingdom of heaven is like this. Some fishermen throw their net out in the lake and catch all kinds of fish. When the net is full, they pull it to shore and sit down to divide the fish: the good ones go into the buckets, the worthless ones are thrown away. It will be like this at the end of the age: the angels will go out and gather up the evil people from among the good and will throw them into the fiery furnace, where they will cry and gnash their teeth. (Matthew 13:47-50)

This parable sounds a lot like the one Jesus told about wheat and weeds growing together -- we considered that on Day 17. Here it's a mixture of fish, and the good ones are to be captured while the worthless ones are thrown away.

Unlike hauling a particular school of fish, where the net is wrapped around that



school, the dragnet was designed to catch everything in its path as it was dragged across the sea floor. Often one end of the net was held on the shore while the boat pulled the rest of the net out in a semi-circle and back to shore -- then both ends were pulled in and the catch was drawn onto the land. The

fish could not be sorted until they were all taken out of the net. This is the point: While we are still fishing, and hauling the nets of the kingdom, we are all together, we are a mixture of 'fish.' When it's over, and all have been 'landed', the judgment takes place. But, it's not us who do the judging... "the angels will go out and gather up the evil people from among the good," says Jesus.

Just a reminder that with all the power we have -- with all that Jesus strengthens us to do -- we do not have the power or the authority to judge people. We do have the power to bear fruit... for, as we are reminded in Matthew 7, verse 20 (Living Bible):

Yes, the way to identify a tree or a person is by the kind of fruit produced.

PRAYER

O sacred Head, once wounded, with grief and pain weighed down,
 How scornfully surrounded with thorns, Thine only crown:
 How pale art Thou with anguish, with sore abuse and scorn!
 How does that visage languish which once was bright as morn!

What language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest friend,
 For this Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end?
 O make me Thine forever; and should I fainting be,
 Lord, let me never, never outlive my love to Thee.

- Paulus Gerhardt - Hymn 202 vv.1 & 3

**POWER WITHOUT
 LOVE IS RECKLESS
 AND ABUSIVE,
 AND LOVE
 WITHOUT POWER
 IS SENTIMENTAL
 AND ANEMIC.**

Martin Luther King Jr.

Sunday 04 April EASTER Through Christ Who Strengthens Me

I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me.
(Philippians 4:13)

O God our Father, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus you have given us the remedy for sin. In him you have opened to us the way to forgiveness for all our past sins, and you have given us the strength and the power to live in purity and in truth.

Help us to put away all evil things.

Silence the evil word;
Forbid the evil deed;
Break the evil habit;
Banish the evil thought;
Take away the desire
and the evil ambition,
and make our lives to shine
like lights in this dark world.

Help us to live in purity.

Make all our words so pure
that you may hear them;
Make all our deeds so pure
that you may see them;
Make all our thoughts and desires
so pure that they may bear
your scrutiny.
And so grant that we being pure
in heart may see you.

Help us to live in truth,

Grant
That we may never speak or
act a lie;
That we may never be misled
by false or mistaken beliefs;
That we may never evade the
truth, even when we do not
want to see it.

Grant to us at all times

To seek and to find;
To know and to love;
To obey and to live
the truth.

This we ask for the sake of him who is
the Way, the Truth and the Life, even
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.*



*"Whether you think you can or not...
you are right."*

- Henry Ford

*from *Prayers for the Christian Year*
by William Barclay

Sources:

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