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PARABLES OF JESUS CHRIST

**A Thirteen Lesson Bible Study
by Jeff S. Smith**

7. What realization finally struck the prodigal son when he hit bottom? What did he decide to do then?

8. What is represented by the old wineskins? What is represented by the new wineskins?

9. The parable given in Matthew 7 is preceded by a discussion on false religionists. What is the true test of discipleship given in verse 21?

10. How should we live every day of our lives? What are some things this should make us do?

11. Does the Bible really teach that some people will be punished in the day of judgment?

12. What became of the first two servants who stewarded their talents well?

Introduction

The parables of Jesus are among the greatest and most picturesque lessons in all his ministry. One must remember that the intent of the parables is always just beneath the surface of the story and not be overwhelmed with what is on the surface. The parables were used to hide deeper knowledge from those unprepared for it. While they became lost in the surface of the teaching, true disciples could delve deeper and learn better how to walk with Christ.

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Lesson 13: *Comprehensive Review*

1. How is a parable like a beautiful casket or a tantalizing piece of fruit? In the study of parables, which is most important: the surface story on earthly matters or the hidden lesson on spiritual concerns?

2. When discussing the growth of the kingdom, Matthew 13:3 must never be overlooked. What is necessary for the kingdom to expand? Compare this to Romans 10:14-15.

3. When that pearl of great price is located, what should we do about it (Proverbs 23:23)? What things might one have to sacrifice in life to become a Christian?

4. Why did Jesus call his disciples the “salt of the earth”?

5. How many times should I be willing to forgive a brother who trespasses against me?

6. What should a man do before building a tower? How does this apply to becoming a disciple?

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1. What does Paul say is a requirement of a steward? What did he mean concerning his own stewardship? What were the Corinthians trying to do with Apollos, Peter and Paul?

2. Who is the great Old Testament steward? What made him so trustworthy and prosperous?

3. What did each of the stewards do with the talents his master gave him before leaving? Was the effort of the third man sufficient? What excuse did he give (Matthew 25:25)? What became of the first two servants?

4. What was the servant's reason for beating the others and getting drunk (Luke 12:45)? How does this passage compare to Second Peter 3:9-11?

5. How can handling "unrighteous mammon" help us to an "everlasting home"?

6. What does Luke 16:14 say about the Pharisees' reaction to this parable? Is this idolatrous affection still alive today (Colossians 3:5)?

7. According to the parable given in Luke 17:7-10, can a Christian ever do so much for God that the Lord owes him? Is salvation then a debt God owes us, or a gift of grace we receive when we accept and obey Him?

8. What did the citizens of the parable in Luke 19 think of nobleman? What becomes of them?

Lesson I: *The Nature of Parables*

The Bible, like any piece of literature, employs a number of figures of speech, including allegories and metaphors. But, the most striking figure used is the parable, for it teaches such deep and timeless lessons.

A parable is not a fable, like those made famous by Aesop (e.g. Androcles and the Lion). The fable is primarily an earthy lesson while the parable seeks to teach a heavenly and spiritual truth. Nor is a parable a myth like the Greek stories touching the unexplained. A parable occupies a loftier realm than these.

The Greek word for our parable is "paraballo" (παραβαλλω), a compound of two very vivid words. The first part is "para-" which means beside or alongside. The second part is *-ballo*, which means to throw. So, to teach by parable is literally to throw a lesson alongside the true object of the doctrine. The teacher illustrates *this* by describing *that*.

In his great work, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord*, R.C. Trench says, "Each one of the parables is like a casket, itself of exquisite workmanship, but in which jewels richer than itself are laid up; or like fruit, which however lovely to look upon, is yet more delectable in its inner sweetness" (15). The disciple that sits at the feet of Jesus, then or now, is curious and hungry to open that casket or peel that fruit to reveal the rich and sweet treasure somewhat hidden within.

Of course, that brings up an important question as well. Why did Jesus use parables in the first place? Why not just reveal everything plainly and without hyperbole? Certain people had already rejected Jesus without considering the evidence from their hearts. As he goes on to say, they were the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy concerning a dull-hearted people whose spiritual lethargy had rendered them unable to learn and unconcerned about ignorance. Because of this malaise, people like the scribes and Pharisees could not see Jesus nor ever understand his truths.

The central focus of most parables was the kingdom that the Messiah was establishing. He wanted his disciples to know what it would be like. Most misunderstood the nature of the coming kingdom, thinking it to be a physical realm headquartered in Jerusalem with the Messiah on its throne.

In fact, Jesus was talking about a spiritual kingdom, not of this world, one composed of all races and not just one. His kingdom was established on the first Pentecost after his resurrection and he was seated upon its throne in heaven (Acts 2:29-33). That kingdom is the church. Most of the parables have to do with the church that Jesus said he would build after Peter's confession in Matthew 16:18.

In studying parables, one must remember to look deeper than the surface for the true lesson. For instance, the parable of laborers in the vineyard is not about wage equity but God's mercy. One must also remember that not every detail in a parable will be significant; some will be incidental.

1. What is the difference between a fable and a parable?
2. What is the Greek word for parable and what does it mean?
3. How is a parable like a beautiful casket or a tantalizing piece of fruit?
4. What should this teach us about studying parables?
5. From what kind of hearts was Jesus obscuring his teaching in parables?
6. What is the central focus of most of Jesus's parables?
7. What was the general misunderstanding about this focused thing?
8. Was Jesus able to establish this objective before he was crucified or did he fail?
9. In the study of parables, which is most important: the surface story on earthly matters or the hidden lesson on spiritual concerns?
10. Is the parable of the prodigal son about a farmer raising two boys out in the country or something deeper? If something deeper, what is it?
11. Who does the father represent? Who does the prodigal son represent?

Lesson 12: *Stewardship*

Bible Texts For This Lesson

- Ten Talents.....Matthew 25:14-30
- Faithful and Wise Steward.....Luke 12:42-48
- Unjust Steward.....Luke 16:1-13
- Unprofitable Servant.....Luke 17:7-10
- Minas.....Luke 19:11-27

“Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (First Corinthians 4:1-2).

We are merely servants, not masters, Paul argued, as the Corinthians attempted to dissect their young church after artificial followings. And as stewards, he recognized that Christians are merely working with borrowed tools when they spread the gospel.

The best example of a steward we have is Joseph, who went from slavery to the oversight of the house of Potiphar, bringing blessing to the Egyptian captain's home. Even in prison, he became the trustee of the facility and the Lord prospered him as he remained faithful to honor and duty. In time, his advice freed him from his cell and he became Pharaoh's governor in Egypt and the nation was blessed with prosperity.

In the parable of the ten talents, Jesus instructs his disciples on the matter of stewardship. Although the Lord has traveled to a far country, he will one day return and call his servants into account for how they have handled the blessings. To those who made the most out of their stewardship, he will reward by admitting them into the joy of their lord.

In the parable of the faithful and wise stewards, Jesus contrasts two stewards with different attitudes toward their master's absence. While the one recognizes it as only temporary and due to end without warning, the other sees it as opportunity to do evil without his knowing, but Jesus will return when the faithless steward does not expect him and punish his failure as a steward with many stripes.

The unjust steward makes an appearance, teaching us the true value of physical resources in this life, sharing them to bless those less fortunate. Indeed, every physical blessing we have is from God (James 1:17 and Matthew 6:25-34). If we are faithful in our stewardship of temporal blessings, we can prove ourselves fit to steward eternal ones.

Answering his disciples' plea to increase their faith, Christ mentions the unprofitable servant who understands that full obedience to God's commands is merely his duty and no labor about which he should boast.

The parable of the minas is much like the parable of the ten talents. This one is intended to disabuse them of false ideas about the kingdom's appearance and nature. The end of it has special warning to all who do not know Christ or who do not obey his gospel (Second Thessalonians 1:8).

1. What is it that first separates a man from his God? What does Isaiah say is an additional result of falling into this state?

2. What does Ephesians 2 argue is the result of Jesus's death for the faithful?

3. What does James call the body without the spirit?

4. Does the Bible really teach that some people will be punished in the day of judgment?

5. What corresponds to the farmer's field—the world or the church? Who are the wheat? Who are the tares? Who is the enemy? What will happen at the harvest?

6. What bearing does this parable have on church discipline?

7. How does the parable of the dragnet compare to Matthew 7:21-23?

8. How does Jesus describe the furnace where the wicked will be cast?

9. Who is represented by the king and the son? Who are represented by the likely attendees, invited first? Why? How did they respond?

10. Who correspond to the second group of guests?

Lesson 2: *The Gospel Seed*

Bible Texts For This Lesson

- Sower of Seeds.....Matthew 13:3-23, Mark 4:2-20, Luke 8:4-15
- Mustard Seed.....Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:30-32
- The Growing SeedMark 4:26-29

An agrarian economy prevailed in the world from its creation until the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century. It was a very simple thing for Jesus to do to look from his “pulpit” out to the fields around him and notice a farmer here and a vineyard tender there. The farmer and his seed provided the Lord with an illustration regarding the growth of his kingdom.

His apostles continued the familiar refrain throughout their New Testament epistles. In dealing with the budding sectarianism at Corinth, Paul compared the work of men and God to laboring in the field. The apostle was not trying to steal any credit for himself nor cause the brethren to heap commendation upon any other man. Rather, it was God who provided for the bounty in the barn. Man must sow the seed and nurture it in the soil, but ultimately he can do nothing to force it to grow.

Christians are to broadcast the gospel seed, spreading it right and left and straight ahead as they traverse the land in their everyday lives. They themselves are to receive “the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” Saints should think of the gospel as seed like they would buy at the store to prepare a vegetable or flower garden. Seed does no good while still in the package, but maintains its potential indefinitely. Seed, taken from the packet and scattered on the soil can bring forth fruit.

The apostle Peter further identifies the gospel message as life-giving seed (First Peter 1:23-25). A tomato seed will lead to a beautiful green vine, which will blossom and give its red fruit. Later, it will wither and die. Not so, the gospel seed. It grows lush, flowers and bears fruit forever. Someone sowed the seed in your heart; now share the blessing, Peter reminds us. That great gospel seed maintains its sway in the hearts of the devoted (First John 3:9).

In the parable of the sower of seeds, Jesus defines four types of hearts and their receptiveness to the gospel seed, as compared to soil types. Ours is to sow the seed and let it fall where it will, for God will give the increase when it falls on good soil. Sadly, three of the four types do not allow the seed to germinate fully.

Next in the parable of the mustard seed, the Lord puts the tiniest seed between his thumb and forefinger to ponder. The kingdom comes without perception, yet grows greater than all the kingdoms of earth.

Finally, Christ appeals to the natural mystery of agriculture. Man puts the seed beneath the ground where he is unable to observe its germination. So the kingdom starts slowly, grows gradually until it is ready to return to its Master.

1. Complete the following chart on the sower of seeds.

SEED FELL AMONG	RESULT	SPIRITUAL EXPLANATION
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- a. wayside
- b. stony places
- c. thorns
- d. good ground

2. What is needed for kingdom growth (Matthew 13:3, Romans 10:14-15)? Does difficulty in locating good soil mean we should not sow? Explain.

3. If a man had never seen a mustard seed, he would certainly be unimpressed. The mustard seed is even less appealing than most seeds. In the lowly mustard seed, we see a reflection of our Savior's choice of entry into the world. What is said of his birthplace (Micah 5:2)?

4. What was Jesus's secular occupation? His relative wealth and earthly honor? According to Isaiah 53:1-3, is he a good comparison to a mustard seed? What becomes of the mustard seed? What becomes of Christ?

5. Sometimes we deem certain individuals unlikely to respond to the gospel and they surprise us and become very godly. What does this prove? Compare this thought to the Lord's words in Luke 7:36-47: what habit of Jesus's shocked the Pharisees and even confounded his own disciples?

6. According to this parable, is conversion an immediate lightning strike to the heart or a gradual persuasion from logic and faith? The gradual progression of the seed (blade, head, full grain) is a comparable doctrine to the apostle's in First John 2:12-14. What three stages of a man's spiritual growth are taught there?

Lesson II: *Separation*

Bible Texts For This Lesson

- TaresMatthew 13:24-30, 36-43
- DragnetMatthew 13:47-50
- Wedding FeastMatthew 22:1-14

Preparation and separation are two closely related concepts, for without the former, one is doomed to the latter.

It is sin that separates a man from God (Isaiah 59:1-2). If fellowship is the bridge between God and man, then sin is the raging river that wipes it out and the blood of Jesus is the grace that rebuilds it (Ephesians 2:16-17).

The washout of sin is repaired only by the grace of God and man's willingness to accept and obey that gospel message. By grace through faith are we able to be reconciled to God as our trespasses are not imputed to us (Second Corinthians 5:20).

Without the offering of Jesus and his resurrection, the bridge of fellowship cannot be rebuilt (First Corinthians 15:17). The breach cannot be repaired outside of the grace of God and a working faith (Galatians 5:4).

It is, of course, death that results from sin in the life of every person. And death is the great separator. It separates the living from their loved ones, which causes them great dismay. More importantly, physical death separates the eternal spirit from the mortal body (James 2:26). The body returns to dust, but the spirit survives the transformation and still must answer for the deeds done in the body (Second Corinthians 5:10). The only distinction God promises to make in the day of judgment is between the justified and the unjustified. While the wicked will be punished in the flaming fire of divine vengeance, the righteous will be rewarded with heavenly rest. The punishment of the unjust is described by Paul as eternal separation from God (Second Thessalonians 1:9).

In these three parables, the Lord teaches his disciples to beware that eternal separation that is condemnation. In the parable of the tares, Jesus describes a farmer whose enemy sowed weeds amid his field of wheat. He interprets the parable himself, showing that the good and evil must be allowed to grow together in the world while he will separate them in the end.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet,” he says. Like the seeker of good pearls and treasure, the man casting the net into the sea is looking for items of intrinsic value. Christ likens him to the events of the end of time, when divine and final judgment will separate the gold from the pyrite. “There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:50).

Finally, in the parable of the wedding feast, he likens the gospel invitation to a wedding feast. God invites the likely attendees—the Jews—who refuse the call and even murder the messengers. Then God issues the same invitation to the less likely—the Gentiles—who filled the hall.

1. How should we live every day of our lives? What are some things this should make us do?

2. Does the Bible permit the idea of reincarnation, wherein each failed spirit gets another chance at another life? What scripture disproves this idea?

3. Would various signs precede the destruction of the city of Jerusalem? How would the second coming be?

4. What did people know when they saw a tender fig tree, putting forth leaves? What would they know when they saw famines, pestilences and earthquakes in their time?

5. How many virgins wanted to meet the bridegroom? What separated the wise from the foolish?

6. What is the lesson in the shutting of the door?

7. After the example of the householder, when might Jesus return for us? In what sad state might he find us? What does this mean?

8. What three things does he advise in Mark 13:33?

9. According to Luke 12:21, what was the error of the rich man? How can we be rich toward God?

10. According to Luke 12:37, which servants will be blessed by the master?

Lesson 3: *The Worth of the Kingdom*

Bible Texts For This Lesson

- The Hidden Treasure.....Matthew 13:44
- The Pearl of Great PriceMatthew 13:45-46
- The Lost Coin.....Luke 15:8-10

Jesus asked this question: “For what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 8:36-37).

The Lord demands that we make value judgments in spiritual matters as well. The Lord’s question is more of a riddle for there is no reasonable answer to it. There is absolutely nothing in the world that can equate to the value of a single human spirit. It cannot be measured in dollars and cents or any other currency. If it could, God might have bought mankind back from sin with cash; instead, only the blood of his dear Son would carry the cost.

At the heart of the value of the kingdom is its purchase price, that “Jesus bore our sins in his own body on the tree” (First Peter 1:24). As Christians, we are citizens in that divine kingdom, having been conveyed into it by our obedience to the gospel (Colossians 1:13). Just as Jesus promised, we are in his church: “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 16:18-19). The Lord shows us the kingdom and the church are synonymous: he built the city and gave its keys to the apostles.

Many modern preachers and religionists have cast votes of displeasure on the subject of the kingdom or the church, encouraging the preaching of Christ instead of the church. But to separate the two is a mortal spiritual decapitation (Ephesians 1:22-23). The Lord is the head of the church, mandating his will and its obedience. As the arms and legs must obey the impulses of the mind in a healthy organism, so the body of Christ, the church, must obey the commands of its Head, Christ to be healthy. The kingdom of Christ is so valuable that it must heed its lawgiver (James 4:12).

In the parable of hidden treasure, Christ teaches us, his disciples, that no sacrifice is too great to attain citizenship in the kingdom. Elsewhere, he indeed teaches that sacrifice will be necessary to meet the King’s approval.

In the parable of the pearl of great price, Jesus repeats the same lesson by different images. Here, he reminds us that the kingdom is of singular value and number. In the Lord’s day, the pearl was held in the highest regard, but a pearl of yellow tinge, or that was rough or not round quickly sank in value. That rare pearl that was round, smooth and white was of unique value.

In the parable of the lost coin, Jesus brings the value of the kingdom down to a human level and equates it with the haven of redeemed spirits. Like a woman who finds a coin she lost and then desperately sought, so is the exasperation and joy at finding God’s mercy after dismissing it in sin.

1. What is something valuable that you once lost and then found? How did you feel when you rediscovered it?

2. For what do people sometimes exchange their souls in this life?

3. How often do we have to make judgments about relative value?

4. Of how much value is a single human soul? Of your soul? Why? At what price was the kingdom of God purchased?

5. Who are its citizens? What are the terms of admission?

6. What happens if we preach only Christ and not the church?

7. How much was the hidden treasure worth to the man who found it?

8. What did Saul of Tarsus have to sacrifice to enter the kingdom (Philippians 3:4-11)?

9. To what kind of person might we liken the merchant who was seeking pearls? When that pearl is located, what should we do about it (Proverbs 23:23)? What does this mean?

10. What things might one have to sacrifice in life to become a Christian?

11. How much work went into finding one lost coin? Why?

Lesson 10: *Preparation*

Bible Texts For This Lesson

- Fig Tree.....Matthew 24:32-44, Mark 13:28-32, Luke 21:29-33
- Wise and Foolish Virgins.....Matthew 25:1-13
- Absent Householder.....Mark 13:33-37
- Rich Fool.....Luke 12:16-21
- Faithful and Evil Servants.....Luke 12:35-40

Jesus taught his disciples always to be prepared to face the judgment day. Every man should live as if today is his last day on earth. People die unexpectedly every day. Very few people get any kind of warning at all as to when they will expire. Most perish with only a few moments or days to contemplate the end (Hebrews 9:27). We ought to live our lives so that whether death calls or the last trumpet sounds at any moment, we will be ready to meet our maker.

In Matthew 24, Jesus had been telling his disciples about the impending destruction of the city of Jerusalem, its Hebrew temple and Mosaic worship. Of this end, there would be many warning signs, including famines, earthquakes and wars. Jesus gave them this solemn warning so that they might spare themselves from the Roman emperor's sword. By heeding his warning, they could know when to flee the city for safety.

Now, in the parable of the fig tree, Christ cements this teaching by admonishing them to pay close attention to the signs and not to dismiss them lightly. Indeed, that generation yet lived when Titus sacked the City of David in A.D. 70. Hebrew historian Josephus reports that no Christians were killed in the invasion, surely because they all heeded their Lord's warnings and the signs of the coming disaster.

In Matthew 25, he teaches the parable of the wise and foolish virgins to compel their preparedness for that great day. Much time would elapse while the bridegroom was away but he would return when they least expected it. Only those prepared for his arrival could join him; the rest would be left out forever. And when he does arrive, it will simply be too late to prepare then.

In the parable of the absent householder, Jesus compares himself to a man who goes away, leaving his servants to their labors. We are admonished always to be ready to receive him back, for he may come at any time of the day at all. He will find some of his servants idle and they will be lost.

In the parable of the rich fool, the Lord instructs his hearers on the dangers of complacency and growing idle. For those Christians who think that they purchased an irrevocable ticket to heaven at baptism, we are reminded that heavenly rest is not for the idle but the laborer. Richness toward God is extolled above serving self in this life.

Finally, in the parable of the faithful and evil servants, Jesus blesses those servants who are always ready for him to return, "for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

1. According to Paul, what is the material that makes up God's building? According to Ephesians 2, what is the foundation and the chief cornerstone of faith?

2. What things will lead to an unsound foundation and an insecure building? Two mottoes adorn the foundation of God. What are they?

3. The parable given in Matthew 7 is preceded by a discussion on false religionists. What is the true test of discipleship given in verse 21?

4. Which of the two builders in the parable would this describe? Did both hear? Did both face trial? What was the difference in them, then?

5. What was the landowner's agreement with the first group of hires? What did those hired at the last hour also receive? Why could the landowner do this if he wanted? If the landowner be God, what does this teach us?

6. What was the attitude of the first group? What was the attitude of the Jews when they heard that Gentiles could also have God's grace?

7. Before Christ died, all God's human creation could basically be divided into two races. What were they? Which had always been God's people? Was the other still God's creatures?

8. Which is represented by the first son who refused and then relented and obeyed? Which is represented by the second son who agreed and then did not?

Lesson 4: *What About Others?*

Bible Texts For This Lesson

- SaltMatthew 5:13
- Lamp Under a BasketMatthew 5:14-16, Mark 4:21-22, Luke 8:16-17
- LeavenMatthew 13:33, Luke 13:20-21
- The Lost SheepMatthew 18:12-14, Luke 15:3-7
- The Good Samaritan.....Luke 10:30-37

On one occasion, Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest of all. He replied that to revere God was the first commandment and to love one's neighbor as himself was the second. "There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-31). His questioner replied that to love a neighbor was "more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." To this statement, the Lord replied to the scribe, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Human reasoning tells us, "no man is an island to himself," but that phrase is reinforced by Bible admonition. Paul told the Romans, "none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself" (14:7). It is impossible for a servant of God to isolate himself like a hermit and live free of influence regarding others.

Perhaps the greatest and most succinct doctrine ever uttered concerning others is found in the sermon given on the mount by Jesus (Matthew 7:12). This golden rule is taught strongly and frequently to our children and yet it is so often ignored by adults. If the golden rule were universally observed, there would be slander or gossip. There would be no murder, theft or violence. If this rule were only observed in the church, how much more peaceful local congregations could be.

When we think of others, we can categorize them in different ways. Others include relatives, our classmates or coworkers, our neighbors, our brethren in Christ and even strangers. Our goal toward every one of them should be their uplifting (Ephesians 4:25).

In the parables of the salt and the lamp under a basket, Christ deals with the subject of Christian influence: our responsibility to walk in the light as He is in the light and shine grace into the catacombs of heathen misery and desperation.

In the parable of the leaven, Jesus reminds us that a little leaven can leaven a whole lump of dough. Influence for good is quiet and gradual, but wonderful.

In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus points out the value of one soul, how it makes all else pale by comparison. Jesus would do anything to rescue one precious soul and we should hold men's fates in equally high regard.

The best known of these parables is that of the Good Samaritan. Jesus answers the question about who is one's neighbor. Everyone is our neighbor and due our concern and Christianity.

1. Besides loving God, what must one do to come close to the kingdom of Christ? Why would monasteries and abbeys impede the cause of Christ?

2. How is the golden rule usually recited? What should it eliminate among men? What should be our goal toward all others?

3. Why did Jesus call his disciples the “salt of the earth”? What is the seasoning value of a Christian who does not exhibit the fruits of godliness?

4. To what end should Christians allow others to witness their good works? How can this be reconciled with the command given in Matthew 6:1-4?

5. What does leaven cause a lump of dough to do? How should a Christian leaven the world around him?

6. When a shepherd leaves 99 sheep in security to search for one lost wanderer, what does that prove about that one misplaced sheep?

7. What occurs when one precious soul is brought home to his Chief Shepherd, Jesus? According to Psalm 23, what can we sheep expect in that fold?

8. What question prompted the parable of the good Samaritan? What was the answer?

Lesson 9: *Sure Foundation*

Bible Texts For This Lesson

- Building a HouseMatthew 7:24-27, Luke 6:47-49
- Workers in the VineyardMatthew 20:1-16
- Two SonsMatthew 21:28-32

When I was a child, my family lived in a house on a hillside in West Virginia, but our house wanted to be in the valley. It began to slip and slide toward the river, just a few inches at a time, but enough to convince us to leave it behind. The house was torn down and nothing has built on its site.

Our house’s foundation was insecure and so everything we built upon it was destined to shift and eventually fall. The Lord Jesus teaches us a similar lesson, in that we must build our spiritual home upon a certain foundation.

The apostle Paul called the saints in Corinth “God’s building” (First Corinthians 3:10-11). In the salvation of souls, there is only one foundation upon which faith can be built safely. That foundation is Jesus Christ. Many have constructed their beliefs after family, uncontrollable emotion or ignorance, but only the Lord is a safe starting point for saving faith.

The church, or the called out, is simply the collection of these redeemed spirits. Each one becomes a member of household of God, “having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20). That foundation is still in effect; the saved are still built upon a foundation of the prophet’s revelations about Jesus and his kingdom and the apostles’ use of the keys.

As Paul intimated, each builder must take care to work with honorable materials (First Corinthians 3:12), because profane and idle babblings will only increase ungodliness. Messages like this lead to condemnable structures and spread, overthrowing some faith (Second Timothy 2:19).

In the parable of building a house, Jesus introduces us to two men who were building houses. One built on rock and the other built on sand. He likens them to those who both equally hear the gospel, but react differently to it. One man obeys it while the other does nothing. The obedient man builds his spirit’s house on a firm foundation while the disobedient is in peril upon shifting sand. His house will fall easily while the other will stand.

In the parable of the workers in the vineyard, we see that those who arrive later in life to the work will by no means be punished, if they are truly faithful. The Gentiles were entitled to salvation just like the Jews in Christ’s house. The old are entitled to redemption just like the young in that place.

In the parable of the two sons, the importance of ultimate obedience is magnified. Even those who sin much in life can be saved if they will but submit to Jesus and be converted. No matter how many sins have been committed, the grace of God is powerful enough to forgive them of the penitent. However, those who promise to be devoted to God and then fall away will not be dealt with lightly.

1. Was the Jews' rejection of Jesus's claim to be their messiah a surprise to God? Explain.

2. What sort of picture does Isaiah paint of the Messiah's visit to earth?

3. What are the implications and fulfillment of Psalm 118:22?

4. What did Jesus's death accomplish for racial harmony in the world? If God does not judge by heredity, how does he view each man?

5. What is represented by old wineskins? What is represented by the new?

6. The Judaizing teachers in the early church were most likely to bind Mosaic law on converts. What happens to one who justification by that law after obeying the gospel (Galatians 5:1-6; see also Galatians 4:8-11). What lesson has this for us today?

7. Whom did the chief priests and Pharisees perceive Jesus was condemning as the wicked vinedressers? Were they right? Who is the son then?

8. To whom was the kingdom given after the builders rejected its keystone?

9. What group of people in the world were invited first to come into the kingdom? What did they begin to make (verse 18)?

Lesson 5: *Blessed Are The Merciful*

Bible Texts For This Lesson

- Unforgiving ServantMatthew 18:23-35
- Creditor and DebtorsLuke 7:36-50
- Barren Fig Tree.....Luke 13:6-9

In the final few years of his life, the apostle Paul often sought to describe the seminal event in his existence and the wonderful results. Perhaps he understood that the conversion of the most dedicated anti-Christian in the Jewish world would be a sign of the faith's authenticity.

Paul always remembered the debt that he owed God and how mercy had been shown to him by the Lord (First Timothy 1:12-13). Because of his gratitude, Paul was led to a faithful life and to share the gospel with others.

Our salvation, like his, is not wrought by "works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy He saved us" (Titus 3:5). The grace of God is amazing and calls us to show mercy to our fellow man.

One can never seriously understand the grace of God unless he is willing to extend mercy to men who ask it of him (Matthew 5:7). We can neither dismiss mercy as too noble an end to attempt nor thrust it aside as too insignificant to trifle with. Such misunderstanding leaves one in danger of missing the thrust of God's mercy altogether.

Paul tells us that God is rich in mercy (Ephesians 2:4) and that Christian fellowship depends in part upon human mercy (Philippians 2:1). Since God was able to forgive us so much—the debt of guilt deserving spiritual death (Romans 3:23, 6:23)—at such a great cost as the blood of his own son, surely we should be able to extend mercy to a man who wrongs us in any way or degree at all. This is possible if we "esteem others better" than ourselves and look out for interests of others.

In the parable of the unforgiving servant, the Lord spins a long tale of justice and injustice to answer Peter's question, "How often shall I forgive a brother who sins against me?" Christ's reply indicates that human mercy is a bottomless cup so long as the repentance is always sincere. This is true because our Father stands ever ready to welcome back a wandering soul who truly desires mercy. But we must remember that God will judge us according to how we judged others.

On another occasion, Jesus was invited to dine with a Pharisee named Simon. While at his house, a sinful woman came and worshiped Jesus. The Pharisee was indignant and implied that if Jesus were really prescient, he would send away such a person. Jesus answered his rudeness in the parable of the two debtors. The one with more sins required more mercy and so showed more gratitude than a self-righteous sinner like Simon.

He taught the parable of the barren fig tree to warn them that soon their system of religion would be cut down. Only if they bore fruit individually could they be preserved individually.

1. How could a blasphemer, persecutor and an insolent man ever enter the ministry?

2. Are we saved by our own merit or a litany of good works accomplished aside from all else? What was God able to forgive in us? What vital lesson must this teach us about relating to others?

3. How many times should I be willing to forgive one who trespasses against me? What was to be the servant's fate that could not pay the king what he owed? What did the servant say in his plea (26)? What on the king's part saved him?

4. How much of a lesson on mercy and gratitude did that servant learn then?

5. What did the second debtor plead (verse 29)?

6. In your own words, what is the lesson of this parable (verse 35)?

7. What did the sinful woman do when she heard Jesus was at Simon's house? How did Simon reply?

8. Who had taught the better lesson: the self-righteous, smug lawyer or the humble, repentant sinner?

9. How long had the man sought figs from his tree? What had he found? How much longer did the fig tree have to begin producing?

Lesson 8: *A New Name*

Bible Texts For This Lesson

- New WineskinsMatthew 9:16-17, Mark 2:21-22, Luke 5:36-38
- Wicked Vine Dressers...Matthew 21:33-45, Mark 12:1-12, Luke 20:9-19
- Great Supper.....Luke 14:16-24

The humble submission to death was Christ's last step to his throne:

ISAIAH'S PROPHECY

FULFILLMENT

- he will be exalted (52:13)Philippians 2:9
- he will be disfigured by suffering (52:14, 53:2).....Mark 15:17, 19
- he will make a blood atonement (52:15).....First Peter 1:2
- he will be widely rejected (53:1-3)John 12:37-38
- he will bear sins and sorrows (53:4-5)....Romans 4:25, First Peter 2:24-25
- he will be our substitute (53:6-8)Second Corinthians 5:21
- he will accept our guilt voluntarily (53:7-8)John 10:11, 19:30
- he will be buried in a rich man's tomb (53:9).....John 19:38-42
- he will save the faithful (53:10-11)John 3:16, Acts 6:31
- he will die on behalf of transgressors (53:12).....Mark 15:27, Luke 22:37

Long after Jesus had been humbled, then resurrected to his throne, Peter quoted Psalm 118:22: "The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone." God foretold that the Messiah he would send into the world would not satisfy the Jews. That Messiah would be rejected and killed and thereby take his throne over a kingdom open to all races.

Isaiah also foretold that the Gentiles would see God's righteousness and enter as God gives his people a new name (62:2). In his death on the cross, Jesus reconciled man to God and Jew to Gentile (Ephesians 2:14-15).

Instead of judging the world by race, God judges it by obedience (Acts 10:35). That faithful person is called a Christian, meaning like Christ (Acts 11:26). Agrippa recognized this new band of people as Christians and the apostle Peter encouraged them to suffer patiently in that noble calling.

In the parable of new wineskins, Jesus teaches regarding the uncomfortable transition from Mosaic Judaism to New Testament Christianity. He foresees that some will try to insert the new liberty of the gospel into the old rituals and customs of the Decalogue.

The same psalmist is quoted by the Lord himself in the interpretation of the parable of the wicked vinedressers. The execution of God's son is prophesied by the victim himself. In the parable of the great supper, Jesus defines the guests in the kingdom of God as the less likely after the more likely decline his invitation.

1. Who bears the blame for God's resistance of the proud? In your own words, what is pride? What thought should destroy all human pride?

2. Why does pride make it impossible for one to come to Jesus?

3. What can become a source of human pride? Is it wrong to possess any of these things? What makes them dangerous?

4. Who is represented by the prodigal son? Whom by his father? What became of the prodigal son after he left home?

5. What realization struck him when he hit bottom? What did he decide?

6. Does the older brother react to his sibling's conversion from pride or humility? Explain.

7. What two men went up to pray? Describe the stereotypical view of their jobs.

8. What was the general tone of the first man's prayer?

9. What was the general tone of the second man's prayer?

Lesson 6: *Count the Cost*

Bible Texts For This Lesson

- Friend In Need.....Luke 11:5-13
- Building A Tower and Making War.....Luke 14:25-35
- Persistent Widow.....Luke 18:1-8

Is it worth it? That is the question Jesus wants potential disciples to ponder. One must weigh the benefits of faith against the hardships inevitably incurred and decide if he is willing to devote his life to the cause of righteousness and deny the sinful pleasures of the flesh.

What is the cost of discipleship? It is great, no doubt. Paul told Timothy, "all those who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (Second Timothy 3:12). The only way to avoid paying the price of persecution is to reject Jesus or become a Christian hypocrite. Either way, one's soul is as good as lost. Paul claimed that paying this price was quite little in comparison with his hope (Second Corinthians 4:16-17).

Paul counted the cost of discipleship and measured it by relative time. An eternal reward was worth paying the price on Earth for a little while.

Another cost of discipleship is paid in self-denial (Titus 2:11-12). The lure of ungodliness and its pleasures is great but the genuine disciple must be able to deny their influence and deny himself their indulgence. Christians forfeit the license to fornicate, drink and swear that others exploit. Is the hope of salvation worth paying this price?

Paul told the Corinthian saints to flee sexual immorality (First Corinthians 6:20). Whenever we are counting the cost, it is good to remember that God redeemed our own souls from damnation with his own precious blood (Acts 20:28, Romans 6:23).

In the parables of building a tower and making war, Jesus explains this requirement in plain language. Beginning with the need to put faith ahead of all else, including family, life and convenience, he illustrates his proposition on devotion. To build one's own faith on the messianic foundation requires a life-long diligence and sacrifice. To declare war on the devil's tactics necessitates a commitment to fight and to win by devoting all one's resources to the battle. Unless you make faith the top priority, you cannot be his disciple.

In the parable of the persistent widow, Jesus teaches on faithful prayer that trusts God can deliver to the one who continually hungers and thirsts after righteousness. God will avenge his elect that cry out to him and do not give up before reaching life's finish line.

In the parable of the friend in need, Christ reminds us of the delicacy of true, saving faith. It is only attained by the heart hungry for God's mercy. We are reminded of his sermon on the mount and its beatitudes (Matthew 5:6). Too many people are filled far short of the goal and stop. They play at religion without letting it completely convert their hearts.

1. What question does Jesus compel his followers to ask before they become disciples?
2. What price of discipleship did Paul reveal to Timothy in Second Timothy 3:12? How did Paul justify paying this price in his own life?
3. What is a second cost of discipleship, according to Titus 2:11-12? What things might fall into these categories?
4. At what price were we redeemed from slavery to sin and death?
5. What things does Jesus say we must hate (love less) than him?
6. What does it mean to bear one's own cross?
7. What should a man do before building a tower? How does this apply to becoming a disciple?
8. What does a king do before declaring war? How does this apply?
9. What is true of the follower who is not willing to forsake all he has if necessary?
10. How did the widow convince the judge to avenge her? How often must believers cry out to God?
11. Why did the neighbor finally arise to help his friend in need that night?
12. What three actions are required to receive good from God (Luke 11:9-10)? What one word would you use to describe this pursuit?

Lesson 7: *Humility*

Bible Texts For This Lesson

- Prodigal Son Luke 15:11-32
- Pharisee and Tax Collector Luke 18:9-14

Peter and Paul both quote the proverb that says “God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble” (3:34). This same sentiment was expressed by suffering, patient Job (22:29) and the one hundred thirty-eighth psalm.

If there is any obstacle that will prevent us from coming to the Lord, surely it is our own foolish, human pride. Thayer defines the Greek word *huperephania* as “the characteristic of one who, with a swollen estimate of his own powers or merits, looks down on others and even treats them with insolence and contempt.”

Because salvation requires submitting one's will to that of another, namely Jehovah. People impressed with their own merit and power are unlikely to crucify their own desires to suit those of anyone else, even the creator of the universe. A proud person finds it hard to admit that he is inferior to another, even God, and so he refuses to submit to the Lord.

The simplicity of the gospel message is a root of bitterness to people proud of their intellect. In the first century, the gospel caused the Jews to stumble because they demanded signs more than true teaching. It caused Greeks to stumble because they loved the polemics and poetry of philosophy rather than simply stated aphorisms and commands (First Corinthians 1:22).

Humility on the other hand takes every source of pride and puts it in a proper category. Money perishes with the using, power is nothing compared to God's authority, appearance is meaningless when Jesus came into an uncomely body, education is futile compared to the wisdom from above, connections are faulty unless made first with heaven, heredity is eclipsed by adoption into God's house, the only prospect that matters is a heavenly hope and only Christ's accomplishment is powerful enough to save.

In the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus teaches us about returning to our Father after departing in search of sinful fulfillment. All we who sin recognize ourselves in his wallowing in the pig slop of iniquity. We rejoice to watch him walk back to his father with repentance in his heart and are encouraged when his father meets him and accepts his apology. God calls the prodigal in all of us to come without delay and be redeemed. But the proud man would never come back and beg mercy; we must be humble.

In the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector, we eavesdrop as two men pray to God. Jesus was specifically addressing “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.” Telling God all you have done well is vain, for he can see and judge and even understand the sins we wish to hide, but telling God all you have done wrong is humble.