

THE PARABLES OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST TALK NO. 1 "THE WEDDING FEAST"

The first parable that we are looking at is found in Matthew's Gospel chapter twenty-two, verses one to fourteen. I'm calling this parable "The Big Day." I don't know if you know anything about making preparations for a wedding. My daughter was married not so long ago and the amount of preparation was incredible! Here is a king in Matthew twenty-two who is arranging a wedding for his son. It is a big, important royal event. Jesus is using this story to show the Jewish religious leaders, that their attitude and their hardness towards Him is really inexcusable. He tells them that the end result is really very terrible, and in the parable He uses this picture of a wedding to make his point. I have called the first part of this story, "The Invitation Refused."

Jesus says that, "the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son. The kingdom of heaven refers to the great joy in the new heaven when all the redeemed will glory in the reign of God in Jesus Christ. It is all described in the terms of a glorious wedding reception. The Lord Jesus is of course the bridegroom. He calls Himself that in Matthew chapter nine and the bond between God and his people, and between Jesus Christ and His church, is often compared with bond of love between a bridegroom and his bride.

So the king arranges this royal feast and the invitations go out. It is a gracious, kind invitation to his guests to attend the wedding reception. We see from verse three that this king is very patient and long-suffering. He gives first a general invitation or call. When nobody bothers to reply to his invitation, he issues a personal invitation through his servants and makes an urgent, moving appeal. He says to them, "There is no shortage of food to eat. The preparations are all complete." They did not have to worry about things not being quite ready. No expense had been spared. So two invitations had gone out and yet for some strange reason none of the guests was willing to come. And then, as if that were not enough, through his servants he issues a third invitation, this time to people who were not originally invited, to anyone they could find.

Now God himself has spoken to humanity and He has said so often in His Word the Bible, "Just come! Come to me." He called Abraham out of darkness and idolatry and He called him to come to Himself. Eventually through Abraham He made a great nation, Israel the very people of God. God called Moses and He said to him, "I want you to come to me and serve me." God continued to speak and sent His servants the prophets to speak to His Old Testament people. Essentially through the prophets He was saying to them that He was calling them to Himself. "Come to me", He was saying, but so often, sadly, they were unwilling to come.

God's people, Israel, had been amazingly privileged. They had seen God judging the Egyptians for their cruelty and oppression. They had witnessed the plagues that came down on that people and they had experienced a great deliverance by God as they passed through the Red Sea on dry land. They had seen their enemies defeated as the waters came together again to destroy them and they had seen God's hand upon them in the desert as He provided food from heaven and water from the rock. They had seen something of God's glory as He led them in the pillar of cloud and fire and in the Shekinah glory in the Tabernacle. They had seen the very ground shake as God gave the ten commandments to Moses on Sinai.

Yes, this people had been amazingly privileged and yet still their hearts were so very hard. In Isaiah chapter five and verse four God says, "What more could have been done for my vineyard that I have not done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?" But God sent more messengers, one such was John the Baptist preaching his message of repentance to the people. And then God sent His own dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, of whom it is written, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive Him." And after this He commissioned the apostles, men of God to preach the Gospel.

The point is this: the king in Jesus' parable symbolises the patience of God. Two invitations had gone out to the main guests, but they had refused to come. Just look at their reaction: verse five tells us that there was nothing but indifference. They had other priorities and they had jobs to go to, things to do and they just showed contempt for the king and his invitation. Verse six says that others displayed active hostility and they moved from disrespect to murder. Jesus' story goes on to tell that they seized the king's servants and treated them insolently and killed them.

History tells us that this parable is a true picture of people's response to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Himself. Why don't people accept Christ's invitation to come to Him for salvation? Jesus himself gives us a clue in John's Gospel chapter five and verse forty when He says, "You are not willing to come to me that you may have life." This is because people are spiritually blind and dead and lost in their sins. They would rather have their sinful way of life than live for the Lord Jesus Christ, the only one who can save them.

Verse seven tells us something about the final response of the king to these ungrateful people. When he heard about their rejection of his invitation to the wedding banquet and the murder of his servants, he was furious. He sent out his army and destroyed the murderers and burned their city. This parable of Jesus was prophetic in its picture. The city referred to was almost certainly Jerusalem. We know that in AD 70 Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman troops and the temple razed to the ground and a great number of Jews lost their lives. It was a terrible time of judgement on the people who had rejected Christ and put Him to death. They had refused his invitation to come to Him and find in Him their Messiah, King and Saviour.

The second part of this parable I have called "The Wedding Hall that was Filled." We need to note very carefully that in Jesus' story the wedding reception was never cancelled. The king's plan was that his son should have a great wedding with a great wedding feast afterwards. Nothing was going to change or prevent that plan. The first invited guests were found to be unworthy and undeserving and very wicked in their response to the king's invitation. Now a third invitation goes out. The king says to his servants, "The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find." "Invite as many as you find", the king said. The scope of the invitation was widened to whosoever would come.

What does this mean? As we have discovered, the first guests were a picture of the Jewish people who refused to accept Christ, but now the scope of God's invitation through the Lord Jesus has been widened to include all people. Both Jews and Gentiles are to be brought in so that no one nation has a special standing before God where salvation is concerned. Jesus died for Jews and Gentiles alike and the Gospel offer is for all people.

We see in verse ten of this story that those who responded to the third invitation of the king were quite a collection of both bad and good, all types and conditions of people. They were not special in any way, it was an invitation open to everyone who would accept it. And so we read that the wedding hall was filled with guests.

So we have "The Invitation that was Refused", "The Wedding Hall that was Filled" and thirdly we have "The Wedding Garment that was Missing." You can imagine the scene. The king smiles at all his guests one after another, but his smile changes to a frown because one guest is not dressed for the occasion. Each guest would have been offered a quality wedding garment on their arrival, but here is a man who sees no need of it. He is indifferent to the offence he will cause to his host. His own, ordinary clothes will be his choice and he refuses the garment offered to him. He comes to the king's table with an attitude of self-satisfaction and there is an arrogance about him.

The king is shocked and amazed and he gives the man a chance to explain himself, but he is speechless because he has no defence. The result is serious because he loses everything and is thrown out of the wedding banquet into a place of darkness and utter despair.

The invitation given in the Gospel of Christ to come to Him for salvation goes out far and wide. Many are reached and yet most are like the man in this parable; they are self-satisfied and defiant. Jesus said that there are two roads through life, one is a broad road that leads to eternal loss, but many are on that road. He said there is also a narrow road and there are just a few on it. This is the road that leads to eternal life.

The man in Jesus story attempted to join the wedding feast improperly clothed and was thrown out. The message for us is that unless we are clothed in the righteousness that the Lord Jesus Christ purchased for us at Calvary by His death for our sins, we can never enter the kingdom of God. We cannot stand before God clothed with our own good deeds for the Bible tells us that "all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags" in his sight.

Have you responded to the king's invitation and trusted in Jesus Christ as your Saviour? Have you ever thought what it cost God himself to provide us with such a wonderful salvation? If you are a Christian are you giving out invitations to the great wedding feast? Are you saying to others "come to the Lord Jesus Christ"? Are you living a life that is full of the king and that commends your Saviour to others?

What is your response to the message of this parable told by Jesus?

THE PARABLES OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST TALK NO. 2 "THE SOWER"

We are looking again at another of the parables or stories that Jesus told to illustrate some important spiritual truths. This time we will think about the parable of a farmer sowing his seed. This is found in the Gospel of Matthew chapter thirteen and the Gospel of Mark chapter four. We read there that such large crowds gathered round Jesus by the lakeside that He got into a boat and spoke to the people from it as they stood on the shore. On this occasion Jesus told the listening crowd three stories about the planting of seeds, something with which they would be very familiar. The parable we are looking at now is the first one and is about a wheat or barley field and the sowing of the seeds. Here is Jesus story:

"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop - a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." When he had finished the parable Jesus said to the people, "He who has ears, let him hear."

The things that Jesus was talking about in these parables were mysteries to most who heard them, and perhaps to you today. They cannot be properly understood by the mere processes of human logic and reasoning. Jesus said to Nicodemus, unless a man or woman is born from above, born of the Spirit of God, they cannot see, or understand, the kingdom of God. The apostle Paul writing to the Corinthians said, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." In this simple story of the sowing of seeds Jesus was illustrating what happens when people listen to the message about God's kingdom. When people hear the good news concerning salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ there are different responses. Everyone who hears the message has a huge responsibility before God, so pray that He may give you understanding as you listen.

Jesus' disciples were also listening to the story He told that day. When He had finished they came to Him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of

the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them." The disciples were so privileged, they were given understanding. In verse sixteen He says to them, "Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear." And so Jesus goes on to give them an explanation of the parable.

He tells them that the seed that is scattered represents the telling out of the message about the kingdom of God. Later, in another parable, Jesus describes himself as one who sowed good seed. So He is the sower and anyone who faithfully proclaims his message is also a sower. The ground or the soil onto which the seed is scattered represents the hearts of those who hear the message and their response to it. It seems from this parable there are just four responses to the proclamation of God's word.

Let's look then at the different places onto which the scattered seed fell in Jesus' story. In verse nineteen of Matthew chapter thirteen, the Lord says: "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path." Here is the picture of one who hears the good news concerning Jesus Christ and does not understand it and so is unresponsive to it. The word is sown in his heart but lies there unconsidered until along comes Satan, the enemy of our souls, and causes him to forget what he has heard. It was because they did not understand or did not care to consider who Jesus was and what He was teaching that some would shout out on a future day, "Away with Him, crucify Him. We will not have this man to reign over us."

Many others down the centuries have heard the words of Jesus and listened to the message of salvation through Him, but have not responded and have soon forgotten what they have heard. We are not to be surprised at this because the Bible tells us that naturally we are all spiritually dead because of our sins. Unless we allow the Spirit of God to enlighten our minds to the truth of the message we cannot respond to it.

Do you realise how privileged you are to have even heard the Gospel and had the opportunity to respond positively to it? This good news is all about the grace of God, that He is willing to forgive your every sin because the Lord Jesus has born the punishment for it in your place. He did this on the cross of Calvary where He suffered for us all. Can I ask you, Is yours a responsive heart? Do you see the seriousness of your sin and your great need of the Lord Jesus Christ to be your Saviour?

Jesus' explanation of the second kind of ground onto to which the seed falls is given in verses twenty-one and twenty-two: "What was sown on rocky places is the man (or woman) who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away." Here is a thin layer of soil. In other words the person shows a very ready response to the message, but the tiny seed never becomes firmly rooted. It is scorched by the sun and destroyed. Here is someone who readily accepts the gospel message. It seems he is easily converted and he is thrilled and full of enthusiasm. He may even shed tears and there is great emotion, but sadly there is no depth or reality to his profession of faith. After a time, it may be days or even months or years, that one falls away and has nothing more to do with the things of Christ.

The scorching sun in this parable pictures those factors that cause this shallow faith to wither. They are pressures of life, Satanic opposition, and persecution because of the profession to be a follower of Christ. All these things ensnare and cause this person to stumble and fall away. Clearly this one is never a genuine follower of the Lord Jesus. His confession is purely emotional and omits the components of true discipleship: self-surrender, self-denial, sacrifice, service and suffering for the sake of the Saviour. A profession based purely on an emotional response to the gospel without true repentance and faith in Christ will not last.

In verse twenty-two we have the third kind of response to the word of God in the Gospel. Here is the third kind of ground onto which the seed falls: "What was sown among the thorns is the man who hears the

word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the seed, making it unfruitful." This is the heart that is like soil that is infested with the roots and runners of thorns. This is not the kind of soil in which a plant can grow unhindered and fruitfully. This is a picture of someone who becomes preoccupied with other things. Here is a Christian who has become caught up with the affairs and enticements of this world. Material things have become all important and along with this comes constant anxiety. There is no longer any room for the consideration of God's Word. Fellowship with God's people is pushed out by other things. There is no time to serve the Lord because of the cares of everyday living or by the desire to gain wealth. The Lord describes this situation as "unfruitful".

This person cannot be spiritually blessed nor can he be a blessing. The word of God comes to him but it is prevented from being fruitful. There is nothing wrong with the sower. There is nothing wrong with the seed. But everything is wrong with this poor person who is absorbed with the things of this world.

It is the Lord's desire for his people that we live fruitful lives to his glory. In John chapter fifteen Jesus says to us, using the picture of a vine, "No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." To be fruitful means to live for Christ and to allow Him to produce in us the characteristics of his Spirit which are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

Are you living a fruitful Christian life or are you allowing the cares of the world and the enticement of material things to choke your growth in Christ?

Let's discover now the last kind of soil in Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed. We find this in verse twenty-three of Matthew chapter thirteen: "But what was sown on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." This is not a heart that is hard or shallow or preoccupied with other things, it is a receptive and fertile heart. Here is a person who hears the message with understanding and willing acceptance. He thinks about what he hears and he believes the message. In genuine repentance he places his trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. The result of this is that he bears fruit. This is genuine conversion that produces the fruit we were thinking about just now. In other words there is evidence that Christ is at work in this life. Where there is genuine conversion there will always be a change in behaviour and attitude and a change in life ambition and purpose. This is the "crop" that Jesus is speaking about when the seed falls on good ground.

Of course we must note that there is a difference in the degree of fruitfulness. We are not all equally loving or gentle or patient. Some are much more Christ-like than others. The wonderful thing is that every true Christian shows forth something of the Saviour in their lives. There is a change and there is a difference when He comes to live in the heart.

As we come to the end of this parable, ask yourself now in the quietness of your own heart, "What kind of soil am I. Am I rocky or thorny or am I the good soil, ready and happy and willing to trust in Jesus Christ and make Him the Lord and King of my life and to bear fruit for Him?"

THE PARABLES OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST TALK NO. 3 "THE LOST SHEEP"

The parable we are looking at this time is found in the Gospel of Matthew chapter eighteen verses twelve and thirteen where Jesus says, "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off."

At the beginning of this chapter the disciples had come to Jesus and asked "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" In reply, Jesus called a little child to Him and used him to teach them about the

great value of children and what they could learn from them about humility. He tells them how awful it will be for those who cause these little ones who are trusting in Him to stumble and fall into sin. The disciples had been focusing their attention on their future greatness: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?", they had asked. Jesus answered that whoever has humble faith like a little child is the greatest in God's kingdom.

The Lord is teaching in this parable that each person is very precious to God. So the picture is of the shepherd going out after just one lost sheep. Jesus talks about his great work on earth and about the church's great task in the world. What is this great task of the church? It is to bring individuals out of darkness into the light of Jesus Christ, and to baptism and instruction in the Scriptures, and to establish them as members of the local church wherever that is possible.

So, He asks the disciples, to get their attention, "What do you think?". They would know from the Old Testament Scriptures that the Lord Jehovah is the shepherd of his people. Jesus reminds them of what God is doing as the Great Shepherd and what He, the Saviour, is doing as the Good Shepherd.

In this little parable we see four things. We see, "The Straying Sheep"; "The Seeking Saviour"; "The Joyful Recovery" and the "Personal Example."

First, then: "The Straying Sheep". Jesus says that this one sheep is lost. In the original language this is a very strong word. It literally means "that which is destroyed". It does not mean that the sheep ceased to exist. It means that it had become useless to the shepherd as long as it was away from him. A lost sheep cannot fulfil its purpose. We are told that this sheep had left the flock, it had "gone astray". The prophet Isaiah says that "All of us like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way." So Jesus asks the question of his disciples, and of us, "What do you think about this?" In other words, what is to be done about this one sheep that is missing and lost? What is to be done about those who are lost to God and astray in their sins?

Jesus says to them, "The shepherd must leave his flock and go looking for the sheep that is lost." Notice that He says, "And if he finds it". The sheep will not be easily found for it is totally lost. It is seriously lost and very far away. We seldom find an "if" in the work of the Saviour, but here is one. The "if" does not show any weakness in the shepherd, but the awful danger of the sheep. In verse eleven Jesus says of Himself, "The Son of Man came to save what was lost." Saving implies great danger, helplessness, hopelessness, ruin and disaster. To be lost in sin is a dangerous and ruinous condition. Where are you today in relation to God? Are you far away, lost and wandering, perhaps without even realising it? In your mind and life are you moving further and further away from the only one who can save you? It is a terrible thing to be lost.

Jesus says of the shepherd in his story, "Will he not go to look for the one that wandered off?" This brings me to the second point and to the "Seeking Saviour". The shepherd took a very special interest in this one particular straying sheep. Why did he do this? Because it was his own! He had a hundred sheep that belonged to him. He had counted them and one was missing - only one. A hired servant might have said "It's only one that is missing, why bother, there are still ninety-nine?"

To the shepherd the whole flock is precious and if only one is missing it must be found. In Jesus' story the sheep represent people who belong to the Good Shepherd Himself. They are his own by his choice, by inheritance and by divine gift. They are his by costly purchase because it cost God's Son his life on Calvary's cross. He is not prepared to accept ninety-nine when He owns a hundred. The flock is the gift of his Father and none of them will be lost.

For a shepherd to go out seeking his lost sheep called for sacrifice. In Jesus' story, the shepherd did not send someone else, he went himself. And God in Christ came Himself from the glorious courts of heaven

down to this poor sin-sick world to seek and to save the lost. His life here was poor and hard and He is described as "a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering". He knew what it was to be hated and despised and ridiculed. He was falsely accused and deserted by his friends. He was spat upon and beaten and finally He was crucified - rejected by those to whom He had come. Why did He do this? He was seeking the one who was straying. He came to save that which was lost. There is a verse that says: "None of the ransomed ever knew how deep were the waters crossed, or how dark was the night that the Lord passed through ere He found the sheep that was lost." He died as our substitute on that cross. If you ever wonder how far people are lost, look again at the awful price that had to be paid by the Good Shepherd who gave his life for the sheep - for me and for you. If you are still lost, this "Seeking Shepherd" is seeking you today. Call out to Him and be saved.

Next, in this parable of the lost sheep, we have the "Joyful Recovery." This parable reminds us that each one of the Lord's sheep is loved equally. I said just now that to the shepherd the whole flock is precious and if just one is missing it must be found. The Lord has great sorrow over straying humanity, but what joy there is in his heart when just one sinner turns to Him in repentance. You may feel that you are just one among the millions on earth so how could God be interested in you. You may feel that you have strayed away too far and there is no hope for you. As you listen to this programme, whoever and wherever you are, you are loved by God. He has sent his Son into the world so that you may be found. Heaven is waiting to rejoice as another lost sheep is found and brought home on the caring, strong shoulders of the Good Shepherd. It is not the millions, but the individual sheep that Jesus is seeking. It is not the good but the lost that He has come to seek and to save.

In Luke's record of this parable we read this concerning the shepherd: "And when he finds the lost sheep, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' And Luke goes on to record Jesus' commentary on this: "I tell you that in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." On this occasion Jesus was telling this story to the self-righteous religious leaders of the day who felt no need for God's forgiveness. They did not recognise that they were lost sheep. Just as the shepherd is delighted when he finds his lost sheep, so heaven is delighted when just one sinner turns to Christ for salvation. Have you made heaven rejoice yet?

Lastly then, in this parable of the lost sheep, we have the "Personal Example." In his willingness to go out and seek those who are lost the Lord Jesus has set an example to those of us who are his followers. Every Christian is to be a seeker of the lost. Jesus said to his disciples, after He had risen from the dead, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And after He had said this He breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit." We are to be Christ's ambassadors to a lost world and soul winners for Him. By his Spirit in us we as Christians have the power to be his witnesses to our family members, work colleagues, friends or some other person. Think of someone like this who is still lost and in their sins; be deeply concerned for them and pray steadfastly for them and go and seek them for Christ.

Lost sheep have to be actively sought. Are you waiting for the right time? It may never come. Imagine the fisherman watching the water but never baiting his hook or casting his line, just waiting and waiting for the right moment and never catching a fish. Jesus went through lonely places and steep tracks to find his lost sheep, but sometimes as Christians we are not willing to go out of our way to seek out and find those who need Him. If you are a Christian you are called to live a life that speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the most powerful argument of all. To show his love for a lost world by our love and our compassion and by the way we live is a powerful witness.

May I ask you, as we finish this discovery of the parable of the lost sheep, "Are you a soul seeker, or are you a lost soul that needs to be found by the Saviour?"

PARABLES OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST TALK NO. 4 "THE PERSISTENT WIDOW"

Hello. We are discovering this time a parable of Jesus found in the Gospel of Luke chapter eighteen verses one to eight. The message of this parable is found in the very first verse. As someone has said, "the key to this parable is hanging at the door." Luke writes:

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

So this story told by Jesus is about being persistent in our prayers and not losing heart when the answer seems a long time coming. The parable is about an encounter between a judge and a widow woman. Now the judge does not represent anyone in particular, certainly not God. Neither does the widow stand for anyone in particular. This parable is a vehicle used by Jesus to illustrate one important fact - that it is the duty of Christian believers to be diligent and constant in their prayer-life.

What do we know about the judge in this parable? As the administrator of the law in the town under his jurisdiction, he was a powerful and important person. We are told that he was a self-centred individual who had regard for neither God nor his fellow men. He was a judge without concern for justice, without sympathy or compassion for the oppressed. Not an attractive character at all!

What of the widow? If the judge was the most powerful person in town, then she was the least powerful, having no authority or the means to stand against the one who had wronged her in some way. She wanted the matter to be put right and so she brought her case to the judge, but he was not in the least bit interested. He was not concerned about her situation at all. In his story Jesus goes on to tell how this widow kept coming back to the judge with her plea for justice, but he kept on refusing her. She gave him no peace, always at his office, stopping him in the street, pleading for him to act.

She was like a tune that you get on your mind and it will not go away, and in the end it becomes irritating. So it was with the judge, for in the end she became a bother to him. Eventually he gave in to her pleas, not because he cared about her or her reasonable request, but because she would not give up and he became weary of her persistence. He said: "I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming."

What then is the lesson we discover in this parable? The Lord says, in verse six, "Listen to what the unjust judge says." Now the lesson is this: if a godless, uncaring man like this judge responded to the persistent pleading of a needy widow, how much more will God bring about justice for those whom He has chosen - his elect people. Who are God's elect, his chosen ones? They are all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. God will not fail those who belong to Him. He will hear and answer their pleas. So God and this wicked, uncaring judge are actually opposites.

Perhaps as a Christian you feel that, like the widow in Jesus' story, you are powerless against those who oppose you. You may feel that there is no solution to the situation in which you find yourself. Jesus is saying to you in this parable, "Always pray. Don't give up!" You have a heavenly Father who does care and is interested in your case! Keep on praying because the Lord has promised that his people will see justice in the end and an answer to their pleas.

Let us remind ourselves of some evidences or marks of the true believer in Christ, that they are among God's elect - his chosen ones. They are, first, those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. They are people who love and trust Him and desire to obey Him, and importantly, they are people who pray. Faith and the spirit of prayer go together because we are to pray in faith, doubting nothing, and the Lord will hear us.

Sometimes we find it easy to pray. If you have been to a Christian meeting where the Holy Spirit's presence was very real and every word was powerful, and there was a holy stillness, you will know that it is easy to pray at times like that. But we have to acknowledge that it is not always easy to pray. Perhaps we have been praying for a particular person or situation for a long time and it seems there is no answer, and our prayers have become difficult. Sometimes we can shorten our prayertime or neglect it altogether because of other cares and concerns. When we do this we are weakened in our walk with the Lord. In this parable the Lord calls his people to persevere in prayer; to keep on in faith, petitioning our loving Father, not giving up until we have his gracious answer.

God has a very special concern for his own people. We face many adversaries and the worst of these is Satan. But God is at work preserving and protecting his elect. He requires of us that we always look to Him and pray to Him and cry to Him day and night. We must pray urgently, earnestly and frequently. There are times when we must, as it were, wrestle with God. We must give Him no rest. Yes, there will be discouragements, but we must persevere and be patient. We must not lose heart.

The widow in this parable had no one else to turn to, but we come to our heavenly Father. She came solely on her own account, but we are called on to plead the cause of the lost. She had no one to help her, but we have One who pleads our cause before the Father - our Lord Jesus Christ. We have the Holy Spirit to help us to pray, as Paul writes to the Romans in chapter eight verse twenty-six: "In the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what (or how) we ought to pray, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." She was limited as to when she could approach the judge, but we can come day and night. She irritated the judge by her constant coming, but God delights in the prayers of his children. He delights to see our faith in Him.

Jesus finally sums up this parable with these words: "However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" As we look around our world today we have to say how little evidence there is of true faith in God. How few there are who faithfully petition the throne of God, not just for their own needs, but for the needs of a lost and dying world. What a challenge this little parable is .

How do we measure up to this clear teaching of our Lord Jesus? He tells us that "Men ought always to pray and not lose heart." Will you make this your aim from now on?

NO. 5 THE PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT MATTHEW 18: 21-35

Hello. The parable of the Lord Jesus that we are discovering this time is about an unforgiving servant. You will find it in the Gospel according to Matthew chapter eighteen, verses twenty-one to thirty-five. Earlier in this chapter Jesus has been warning about the danger of causing others to sin against God - particularly young children. Instead, He says we should find the straying sheep and bring it back to the fold.

But suppose it is the other way round; suppose someone is sinning against me? And so Peter asks the Lord a question: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, ' I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven." Jesus has already shown us the principle of how we should act towards those who wrong us. In verse fifteen: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your

brother over." In other words the first step to reconciliation is a private not a public act. It is to be a personal interaction.

Perhaps Peter felt he was being very generous when he suggested that he should forgive seven times as though a forgiving spirit was something to be measured very carefully. Jesus' answer made it clear that there are no limits to forgiveness, it is a basic attitude and a state of heart. Forgiveness is not something to be measured or calculated. We don't hear people saying, "How often should I love my husband or my wife or my children?" Such love is unconditional and continual. Our blessed Lord was saying in effect, "You must never stop forgiving those who wrong you."

Now, forgiveness is not a natural or automatic virtue. It is not always easy, but it is very important. So Jesus tells this parable to illustrate the great principle that a person who is forgiven themselves must always have a forgiving spirit towards others. He says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants." These servants had a duty to collect the royal taxes in their provinces and to deliver these large sums of money to the king at the appointed time. One of these high-ranking servants owed the king ten thousand talents. To give you an idea of the size of this debt, one talent was worth six thousand denarii and one dinar was the wage of a working man for one day. A working man would have to labour for one thousand weeks to earn just one talent. He could not accumulate or save even ten talents in a lifetime. So ten thousand talents really was a huge amount of money, the equivalent of millions in today's currency.

The man was unable to pay this vast sum. What had he done with it? Had he squandered it on himself and his family? Had he thrown big parties or just gambled it away? We do not know, but the fact is he stands before the king with nothing. He is completely unable to pay his master and so is faced with the penalty imposed by the law of the day. In verse twenty-five we read: "Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt." His situation is utterly hopeless and in relation to this huge debt the sale of his family and possessions would produce very little money for the king.

What is he to do? He is at the mercy of the king. Jesus' story continues: "The servant fell on his knees before the king. 'Be patient with me', he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'" He does not deny the debt. He does not explain what he had done with the money he had collected. He makes no excuses. He offers to repay the debt in time, but he must have known that this was impossible, but he is desperate. And now comes the first powerful lesson of this parable. What does the king do? Does he reject out of hand his servant's plea? No! We read, "the servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go." The king had compassion on this erring servant and took pity on him as he saw his apparent contrition and freed him from his enormous debt. Here is a picture of the great compassion and mercy of God towards sinners who come to Him for mercy and forgiveness. But the parable does not end here. This picture of unconditional and abounding forgiveness is not the only lesson that Jesus wants Peter to learn from the story. It goes on: "But when the servant went out (from the king) he found one of his fellow servants who owed him just a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!', he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt." Note that the sum that this man owed was about one six hundred thousandth of the amount forgiven by the king to his servant. The sum owed in this case was really very small, but the servant of the king had no pity, no compassion. The debt was too small to have this man sold into slavery, but he could legally have him committed to prison and this is what he did.

The other servants on hearing about this are horrified and report the matter to the king. They felt sad for the king, that his kindness had been treated with such contempt. So he calls the servant to him. "You wicked servant" he says, "I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" Now this unmerciful, unforgiving servant has to

face the consequence of his actions. "In anger his master turned him over to the jailers until he should pay back all that he owed."

Jesus concludes this parable with another powerful lesson. He says, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." The unforgiving and the unmerciful cannot count on the mercy and forgiveness of God. As those who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ we should be filled with unceasing gratitude to Him for saving us and releasing us from the penalty due to us because of our sins. Christians are to be forgiving and merciful because of the forgiveness and mercy they have received. Those who have been forgiven much should love much. We must forgive those who sin against us. This was the lesson that Peter and the others who heard this parable had to learn. Forgiveness should not be measured out or calculated depending on circumstances, but should be given willingly, and from the heart, to those who wrong us or who are in debt to us in some way.

What has God done to make forgiveness possible for us? We are all debtors to God because we have all broken his law and fall short of his standard of perfection. The Bible says, "For we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God." This is an immense and unpayable debt. There is nothing any of us can do to make amends for or to pay for our sinfulness before God who is utterly holy. But because of the Lord Jesus Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, the debt of sin has been fully paid for all those who place their faith in Him. "God made Him, who knew no sin, to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." In other words, the Lord Jesus Christ allowed our sins to be placed on Him, so that his perfection could be placed on us. He did this so that we could be set free from the debt of sin for ever. Have you come to Christ and been forgiven of all your sins?

So forgiveness is no trivial matter. There is always a cost to be paid. It may be the cost of swallowed pride. It may be the cost of mending a relationship. But where there is true forgiveness, there is also a sense of peace and joy. Our forgiveness cost the Lord Jesus his very life. This was the highest cost. A cost that took the Son of God to the cross to be punished in our place. Dare we who have been forgiven much refuse to forgive those who hurt us?

THE PARABLES NO. 6 " THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD"

Hello again. This time we are looking at another of the parables of the Lord Jesus Christ. You will find it in the New Testament of the Bible, in Matthew chapter twenty verses one to sixteen. It is the parable of the workers in the vineyard. From the previous talks in this series you will have discovered that these stories were told by Jesus to bring home to his listeners some important spiritual lessons. Although the parables are set in the time of Jesus and the incidents relate to situations prevailing then and in that culture, the lessons that come from them are very clear even in our day.

In the last verse of the previous chapter Jesus makes this statement: "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." In this parable of the workers in the vineyard He explains what this means. He sums it all up in chapter twenty verse sixteen with the words: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last. Many are called but few are chosen."

The parable is all about the owner of a vineyard and the men he employed to work for him. At the end of the day they are all rewarded for their work. The parable is actually about what will happen when God's reign in its final, earthly phase is unfolded. It is effectively a picture of the Day of Judgement. Because, at the end of the day, we must all appear before God.

This landowner is clearly a wealthy man with an estate that included a large vineyard requiring many workers to look after it. In this parable Jesus is telling us something about God. He is reminding us that God is the owner of everything and the right to rule is His, not ours. Now this landowner would have had a steward, or foreman, whose responsibility it was to care for the vineyard. However, he himself is so

interested in it that he goes out at daybreak to hire the workforce personally. He meets some unemployed men and agrees with them the terms of employment. He offers them the standard daily wage for a soldier or a workman. The terms may have been discussed, but the workers do agree to his offer. We read that "he agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard."

Later, at nine o'clock that morning, he goes looking for more workers because the vineyard needs many men to attend to it. In the marketplace idle men are chatting together and the landowner approaches them. There is no discussion or agreement concerning wages. The men agree to go and work in the vineyard and trust their employer to be fair to them. They raise no objections and ask no questions, they just go and do their work. And the same thing happens again at mid-day, at three o'clock and at five o'clock, almost at the end of the day. To the men at five o'clock the landowner says, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?" They reply, "Because no-one has hired us." So he says to them, "You also go and work in my vineyard and whatever is right you will receive." And so they go without further discussion.

Now wages were usually paid at the end of the working day, but there is something strange and unusual in this story. The owner gives very clear instructions to his foreman. We read them in verse eight: "The owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'" So along come the men who have worked for only one hour and they are paid. Then come those who have worked for only two hours and so on until those who had started work right at the beginning of the day are paid their wages. Those who had worked hard all day had to see exactly how much the others were paid who had worked only a part of the day. Normally this would never happen, but the usual order is completely reversed. Jesus is emphasising the point He has already made, that the last will be first and the first last. So the workers who had been toiling all day long, and had to wait to the very end, must have been very disappointed. That is not all. There is another surprise for them. The latecomers receive a denarius for just one hour's work, the same as those who had worked all day. As you might imagine, they immediately complained to their employer. "Why should we only get the same money for a full day's work, and in the heat of the day, as these men who have only worked for one hour?"

And now comes the real meaning of this parable - the main lesson to be discovered. In taking the story through to the evening, or the end of the day, Jesus is pointing us to the evening of the world's history. In other words the great day of the final judgement and the revealing of God's kingdom in all its glory. Remember the context of this parable, going back to the end of chapter nineteen where Jesus is replying to a remarkable question by Peter: "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" He received an equally remarkable answer. There is a special promise to the disciples: "You who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." There is also a promise for all who suffer loss for his sake: "they will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life."

Remember that Peter was a Jew and like most Jews he did not understand God's purposes concerning the salvation of the Gentiles. We read in Acts chapter ten verse twenty-eight, that it took a strange vision from heaven to make him understand that God's plan of salvation is for all nations. Peter and his fellow disciples were apt to be rather proud of their sacrifice for Christ's sake and the Lord knew this.

In calling the world to a knowledge of Himself, God exercises free, sovereign and unconditional grace. He calls nations to be saved at his own time and in his own way. This is seen in his calling of Israel to be his own chosen people at the "beginning of the day." We see some Gentiles called later as Paul took the Gospel into Asia minor and Europe. And down the centuries, as time has passed, we see other nations around the world called into God's kingdom. There are those yet to be reached and saved, some as it were at the end of the day, just before Christ returns. Are these to be any less blessed than those called centuries ago? Of course not!

So, listen carefully to the landowner's reply: "Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" The price was agreed and there was nothing unfair about that. They must accept the will of their employer and not resent his goodness to those who came later to the work. This parable is reminding us that God is really very kind, very merciful and very gracious to undeserving sinners no matter who or where they are. It reminds us that God is sovereign and is in full control of every situation. His will is best and He is very just and very fair in all his dealings with mankind.

We also discover from this parable that in calling individuals as well as nations, God is sovereign and accountable to no one else. He has mercy on whom He will have mercy and compassion on whom He will have compassion. That is found in Exodus chapter thirty-three verse nineteen. In this parable some were called at dawn, others at mid-day, still others in the evening. So some are called of the Lord early in life, like Timothy, and work for the Lord for a lifetime. Others are called at "the last minute" like the thief on the cross. Perhaps you came to Christ in your teens or perhaps in your fifties. Maybe in the autumn of life He called and saved you. All are equally justified and accepted, and will be found at Christ's right hand on the last day. This does not mean, however, that all the saved will have the same degree of glory. The inheritance of all believers is sure, "kept I heaven" for us as Peter reminds us in his first letter. But Paul told the Corinthian believers that "each will be rewarded according to his own labour." This is not to say, and this parable does not teach this, that we are saved by working for the Lord. We are justified, not by the things we do, but by our faith in Christ. When we are called into Christ's vineyard, we work for Him in response to his love for us so as to please Him.

The fact is that none of us deserved that the Lord Jesus should die for us on the cross. So whether you have been a Christian all your life, or whether you have only recently come to Him, or whether you are nearly at the end of your life, the great thing is that God has been merciful to you and has saved you. So never question the goodness of God to others, but thank Him for his grace towards you.

THE PARABLES OF JESUS NO. 7

"THE RICH FOOL"

The parable we are discovering this time is found in the Gospel according to Luke chapter twelve and verses thirteen to twenty-one. The story is usually called "The Parable of the Rich Fool." At the beginning of chapter twelve we are told that a huge crowd had gathered around Jesus to hear his teaching. The crowd was so big that they were trampling on one another. In that crowd there was a man on whom Jesus' words seem to have made no impression at all. It appears that someone in his family had died, because he says to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

He felt he was being cheated and it seems he felt that justice wasn't being done. Situations like this often bring out the worst in people. Where there is a will there is often disputation over its fairness and some feel they have been badly done by because they have been left out or not been given as much as they anticipated. This is how it seemed to this man who approached Jesus with his demand. It appears that his brother had kept everything for himself and was not willing to share the inheritance.

It was a situation that had taken over his whole life and he felt compelled to involve Jesus in his problem.

In verse fourteen we are told: "Jesus replied, 'Man who appointed me a judge or arbiter between you?'" Jesus refused to get involved. Why? Well, of course, there were legal authorities available to look into such matters. But also Jesus' task was far more important. He had come to answer the spiritual needs of the people, to seek out and to save those who were lost in their sins. He knew this man's heart and his preoccupation with obtaining some material gain, so He issues a warning. It is a warning to all in that great crowd and not just to this one man. He says to them all, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Here is a very serious warning that every one of us should take to heart. We should remind ourselves that it is the love of money that is the root of all kinds of evil. Not that money itself is the root of all evil, as an old song said, but it is the desire for money above anything else that leads to many sinful actions and attitudes. Where money is concerned Christians should be generous with what they have. Do we delight to give help to others or am I a mean, selfish person? Am I a greedy person in my attitude to money? The Greek word for greed is very descriptive. It literally means "the thirst for having more." Be on your guard against the tyranny of greed and of always wanting more and more and more - not just money but material things. Think carefully on these words of the Lord Jesus: "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Your life, the life that really matters, is not made up of the things you possess. There is a spiritual dimension that is of far greater importance because it has to do with your relationship to God and to your eternal destiny.

So Jesus now drives his point home with this parable of the rich fool. "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops..' Then he said, 'This is what I will do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' And Jesus said, "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God."

Here is a rich farmer who has a fine harvest and perhaps the other farmers were amazed at the quality and size of it. What was wrong with that? Nothing! Was there any question of dishonesty? No, that is not even hinted at. What was wrong soon becomes clear in verses seventeen to nineteen. He's going to build new barns for all his crops and all his goods and he's going to say to himself, 'That's it! I have all I need for years to come. I am going to take it easy and live the good life, eating and drinking and partying! But there are vital things that he has left out of his thinking. He cannot be sure of the years to come. He forgets that, like us all, he is mortal. He fails to realise, too, that all his material wealth will not save his soul. He does not recognise that his deepest need is spiritual, not material, and that he is accountable to God. Neither does he take account of the needs of others around him who are not so well blessed. He is a thoroughly selfish man. In the original Greek of the New Testament, the words "I" and "my" occur twelve times in this one parable. Eight times he says "my" four times he says "I".

Notice, too, that he does not thank God or glorify Him in any way for the bounty he has received. He behaves like one in whose life God has no part. God is not in his thoughts and all he can think about is his own enjoyment and selfish ambitions. Is that not the attitude of so many in our world today? They live only for pleasure and for themselves. Has God blessed you with material comforts and provided you with all you need? Then give Him the thanks due to Him and learn to use what you have for His glory and the benefit of others.

So what is God's word to this rich fool? We have it in verse twenty: "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded of you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" "Fool" here has the meaning of "senseless" or "witless". This man had no sense of his need of God. He thought he was in control of his life, his body and his soul. He was the master of his fate! But now God tells him that his life is at an end, not after many years, but on that very night. How different he was from King David who wrote in Psalm 39, "Show me, O Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is nothing before you. Each man's life is but a breath. Man is a mere phantom as he goes back and forth; he bustles about, but only in vain; he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it."

So what is the purpose and application of this parable told by Jesus? He gives us this picture and He makes the point that anyone who lives only for self, and is not living in relationship with God, is the same as this tragic fool. He is not saying it is sinful to be rich or to provide for our families or to be conscientious

in our employment, but what must come first in our lives? In Luke chapter twelve verse thirty-one Jesus says that we are to seek first the kingdom of God and then He will give us the material things we need for living our lives. Another Scripture reminds us that God will supply all our need according to his riches in glory, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul puts it like this: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, though He was rich yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." There are those in our world who are very rich materially speaking and yet they do not know anything at all of the spiritual riches that Jesus gives. They are actually very poor in the sight of God. And yet there are some who have nothing of this world's wealth, but because they know Jesus as their Saviour they are very rich indeed. They are rich because they receive all the spiritual blessings of their heavenly Father. A hymn-writer wrote these words: "Seek ye first not earthly pleasure, fading joy and failing treasure, but the love that knows no measure. Seek Me first." If we put the Lord Jesus Christ first in our lives and honour him and live for Him then we shall be rich indeed.

PARABLES NO. 8 "THE LOST SON"

As we continue to discover the parables told by the Lord Jesus Christ we come this time to the Gospel according to Luke chapter fifteen and verses one to thirty-one. Here we find the story Jesus told about a son who was lost. It is usually called the parable of the prodigal son. To be prodigal means to be wasteful; a spendthrift; someone who spends what they have to excess.

In Jesus' story we have a young man living on a farm with his father and older brother. Like many young people he decided that he wanted his freedom. He had had enough of life on the farm. He wanted to get out and go his own way. To do this he needed money, and so he comes to his father and effectively says to him, 'Father, I don't want to wait until you die to get my share of your estate, would you please work out for me what you would leave to me in your will. Will you let me have the money now?' Jesus did not say how the father felt at such a request. He must have been very patient and caring of his sons because in verse twelve we read: "So he divided his property between them." Notice that he gave the older brother his share also.

Verse thirteen continues: "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had (and) set off for a distant country." He was determined to enjoy himself in that distant place with all his newly acquired wealth. We do not know if it was his intention just to waste what he had, but all around were the attractions and pleasures of the city and he is fascinated by what he sees. He is drawn into it all and we read that "there he squandered his wealth in wild living." While he has plenty of money and is freely spending it he gathers lots of new friends only too willing to enjoy life with him. Human nature never changes. It is the same today when someone wins a large sum of money, suddenly there are friends and relatives, not seen before, all wanting to be a part of their life and to benefit from their riches. Often when people come into great wealth suddenly they cannot handle it and they spend and spend until suddenly they realise that it is all gone. So it was with this young man. There came a day when he had spent everything and the good times came to an end. He had nothing left and his so-called friends deserted him.

There was, of course a basic fault in his reasoning. He thought that his need for enjoyment and happiness could be met by complete freedom to do what he wanted, and by material possessions. No longer under the discipline of his loving father he would be free to enjoy life to the full - so he reasoned. This is the basic problem of all humanity. The thinking of the majority is that if they leave God out of their lives they will know complete freedom and satisfaction. The spiritual vacuum that this thinking leaves in lives cannot be filled with either possessions or pleasure for they are at best only temporary.

For the prodigal it was a kind of madness to leave the security of his home and to turn his back on a loving father. Now he was going to experience a great loneliness and a great degradation. With all his money gone and all his companions gone he faces a crisis. Jesus' story continues: "After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in the whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs." Think of his shame and his lost status. The son of a rich farmer reduced to labouring for someone else, and what was worse having to feed pigs. This, for someone of his culture, was just about the most degrading occupation imaginable! Before he had been a loved son, now he was less than a hired servant in his father's home. He is on the slippery slope downwards to ruin. He is so hungry that the story says, "He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no-one gave him anything."

I'm glad that Jesus' story did not end there with that young man in such a hopeless condition. The parable goes on to say: "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father.'" He had to come to that point where he realised that his situation was really serious. Jesus says "he came to his senses." The reality of his condition hit him and he knew what a fool he had been to live the way he had. It is a wonderful thing when people come to their senses and realise that the only way to true freedom, true goodness and real purpose and fulfilment and blessing is to live in right relationship with our heavenly Father who loves us beyond anything we could ever deserve.

It was good for this young man to be alone with every support gone and only the sound of the pigs for it made him stop and think. What were his thoughts? Was this all that life was about, just eking out an existence, no better than an animal? How did he come to his senses? He had misery and he had memories. He remembered that in his father's house there was food enough and to spare. He thought about home and about his father and the security and love that there was there for him. Perhaps you have come to a point in your life where you are wondering "What is it all about?" Perhaps you have been deserted by friends or find yourself in a desperate situation. You realise that there is a spiritual emptiness in your life. Are you someone who has wandered away from God having, in the past, experienced his blessing? Now is the time to stop and consider where you are in relation to the God whose very name is love. God understands you. He is merciful and longs for you to come to your senses and turn to Him.

In the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, God has opened his heart to needy, helpless sinners. The one who told this parable is the one who went to the cross of Calvary out of love for those who are also in a hopeless spiritual condition, lost in sins and facing the judgement. He died for needy people like us, who have gone astray. Isaiah's prophetic words, in chapter fifty-three verse six, express it like this: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." Christ died as our substitute and bore the penalty due to our sins.

If you are starving spiritually it is certainly not for the lack of spiritual bread. If you are lonely, it is not for lack of love in the heart of God. If you are guilty, and lost in your sinful way of life, it isn't because there is not someone to redeem you. The prodigal knew that there was food enough and to spare in his father's house and yet he was starving. There is provision for all in God's house. There is provision for the very least, for the most guilty, the most needy, the most wayward. Whoever you are there is provision for you, and you can come home to the Living God if you will.

The turning point in this story came when that sad, desperate young man said, "I will set out and go back to my father." All his searching of his conscience and the realisation of his hopelessness was useless without some action on his part. He has considered his ways and given careful thought to his situation. There is deep concern now in his heart, not just regret or feeling sorry for himself, but a real repentance. True repentance means turning away from our sinful ways and coming back to our heavenly Father through faith in Christ and practical obedience to the Gospel. This lost son made his decision and he got up and set-off home without delay. He made no attempt to improve his appearance, soiled as he was by

the work he was doing, but went just as he was. That is how we must come to God for forgiveness. We must come just as we are: "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling." So he got up and went to his father.

The parable continues: "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired men. But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate."

It must have been a difficult journey for the lad hardly knowing what to expect. Would his father accept him back? What kind of reception would he get? But we read, "The father was filled with compassion and ran to his son." Just picture it - the slow steps of repentance but the swift steps of forgiveness. There was much forgiveness. There was great acceptance. There was full restoration. All the son's privileges were restored and the father showed such joy at the return of his prodigal. What a glorious picture this is of God's grace and mercy towards all who will come to Him in true repentance; towards all who will acknowledge that they have sinned, not only against those around them, but more importantly against heaven, against God himself.

Sadly the older brother, who had stayed on the farm, was angry and upset at the welcome his wayward brother received. He could not share in the father's joy. He was jealous and resentful, thinking only of himself and without any thought for his brother. Let us beware of an attitude like that of this other son, an attitude that resents the blessings of others and so misses out on the joy this should bring.

This parable is a challenge to all of us today. Are you a son or daughter who has wandered far from home and needs to return and get right with God? Are you doubting or questioning God's love for you? Realise afresh the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord for you and come to him in repentance and faith today.

THE PARABLES OF JESUS NO. 9 "THE MUSTARD SEED AND THE YEAST"

This time we are discovering two short parables of the Lord Jesus found in the Gospel according to Matthew chapter thirteen verses thirty-one to thirty-three. They are the stories of the mustard seed and of the yeast. Here they are:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches."

"He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."

The people to whom Jesus told these parables were very familiar with the pictures he used. The mustard plant has yellow flowers and tiny black or white seeds in pods and, as this story tells us, it is capable of vast development. Yeast is still used in making bread, to make the dough rise during the baking process. Yeast is also known as leaven and is translated in this way in some versions of the Bible.

These two parables are a pair and they actually go together to make the point that Jesus wanted to teach the people. You will note that both refer to "the kingdom of heaven." This first one, about the mustard seed, refers to the kingdom's outward growth. The yeast refers to its inward growth. The two cannot be separated for what is true inwardly must be expressed outwardly. The Holy Spirit of God does His work in

the human heart and it becomes evident in the outward life. The spiritual root is in the heart and then the spiritual fruit is in the life. So if there is no root there will be no fruit.

These two parables are actually a great encouragement to us as believers in Christ. They remind us that God is at work all through this age in which we live. It is the age of the Gospel and of his grace towards mankind. The story of the mustard seed is recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, perhaps emphasising its importance. Here is a tiny, seemingly insignificant seed planted in a field and yet it grows and grows until it is a tall tree and the birds can perch in its branches. This plant is still seen in Israel today and can grow to some three to five metres in height. In the Autumn when its branches have become strong and rigid, birds of many species find a welcome shade from the heat of the sun or a shelter in the storm. According to Jesus the kingdom of God, in its outward visible form, is just like that. From what was a seemingly insignificant beginning there will be very great and remarkable results.

The disciples and the other followers of Jesus were often impatient. They were small and weak and insignificant in the world's eyes and at times they were tempted to despair. So often it seems they were looking for revolutionary changes to take place there and then. They had their eyes on the material rather than the spiritual. They were thinking about the many Old Testament prophecies regarding Israel and its glorious future prosperity and final significance. The same Old Testament teaches us that spiritually, great results generally develop from very small beginnings. The New Testament teaches the same principle and the message of this first little parable is that we must be patient, be faithful, trusting that God will work out his purposes concerning his kingdom. Keep on praying, keep on working for your Master. There is precious seed to sow and there will be a wonderful harvest.

This parable is actually a prophecy that has already been partly fulfilled, as we can see from Matthew chapter twenty-four and verse fourteen where Jesus says: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." The progress of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ has taken many centuries. That which began with just a handful of disciples has grown and grown until millions have been brought by faith in Christ into the kingdom of God. From the beginning on the Day of Pentecost as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles the message has been proclaimed in nation after nation. It is a wonderful story of how that which was small and seemingly insignificant has gone around the world bearing fruit.

This parable is about the establishing of the kingdom of God in individual lives. The Holy Spirit begins his work within as He convicts of sin and of righteousness and the judgement to come. His work continues as He brings repentance and new birth and faith in the Saviour. The Spirit will continue his work until the day of grace is ended and the church of the Lord Jesus is complete. Christ said that He would build his church and the very gates of hell, all the opposition of Satan and his servants, will not prevail against it. Jesus is the Lord and Saviour of the Christian believer and the work He has begun in us He will bring to completion. Although there may be times of failure on our part, and times when we are spiritually low and weak, He remains faithful.

The second parable about the yeast also reminds us that the work of the Lord in establishing his kingdom in hearts and lives goes on quietly but powerfully, out of sight, but with very visible results. The woman in this story takes a huge quantity of yeast with which to make her bread. It amounted to around twenty-two litres! Yeast once mixed into the dough continues its process of fermentation until the whole batch has risen. So also the citizens of God's kingdom are to be the leaven of the societies in which they live, working to bring about the rule of Christ. They are, to use another picture, to be salt and light in a corrupt and dark world. As Christians we should care about society. We should care about justice and speak out against oppression and indecency and dishonesty. That which speaks the loudest must be the way we live our lives as upright, honest, decent and pure citizens, so influencing, like the active yeast, the societies where God has placed us.

Above all we must recognise that the greatest need of our families and friends and colleagues at work, is spiritual. We do not ignore the material and physical needs of those around us for the Lord Jesus Himself reached out in love to heal and to feed the needy, but it is the desperate need of the human soul that is the greatest need. So as Christians we should be those who take the message of Christ to those around us with hearts that are burdened for the lost. God is at work and He calls us to work with Him in the evangelisation of the world.

As we look back over the history of the church, we see God working in hearts and lives. We see one of the great persecutors of the early Christians, Saul of Tarsus, becoming an apostle of Jesus Christ and the church's first great missionary. So as believers in Christ we must be encouraged by these two small parables told by Jesus. The kingdom of heaven is like a tiny mustard seed which, when it is finally grown, becomes like a great tree in which many find salvation and a place of security. That "tree" is still growing and will do so until Christ comes again to take his church home to glory. It is like yeast which, when put in the measures of flour, causes great growth. So it is with the gospel of Christ when it is sent out into the world, it spreads and grows and brings spiritual life and blessing to all who will believe.

THE PARABLES NO. 10

"THE PARABLE OF THE WEEDS"

Once again we set out to discover another parable of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you have a garden or if you like to grow your own vegetables, you will know how annoying it is when weeds get among the plants. They often spoil the beauty of a garden and will sometimes prevent proper development of the things you want to grow. The story we are looking at this time is all about weeds and it is found in the Gospel according to Matthew chapter thirteen from verse twenty-four. It is another parable about the kingdom of heaven. Here it is:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' " 'An enemy did this', he replied. The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' " 'No', he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned, then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

In this story we see six things: We see a sower, a field, seed, a crop, a harvest and an enemy. This parable is found only in Matthew and it has similarities to the parable of the sower and the seed that appears earlier in this chapter. In both we see the activity of Satan. In the first he snatches away the good seed and in the second he actually sows weeds among the wheat. In the first story all the seed is good; in this one there is a mixture of good and bad. In the parable of the sower the good seed is God's Word sown in the lives of those who hear it. In the parable of the weeds it is people who are represented; those who belong to God's kingdom are the "good seed". Those who do not belong to the kingdom are the weeds that grow up among the crop, planted there by the enemy.

The weeds spoken of here are "tares". This is a noxious weed that in its early stages closely resembles wheat and it is host to a fungus that is poisonous to both animals and man. It was not until the grain began to develop and mature that the workers in the field could see any difference between the wheat and the tares. The planting of these weeds was the work of a particularly vicious enemy who wanted to destroy the farmer's crop. The servants are eager to try to solve this problem and they suggest pulling up the tares. It sounded like a good idea, but no, the roots of the wheat and the tares are intertwined so if they pull up the tares the wheat will be pulled out as well. The difference between the wheat and the weed will be much more apparent at harvest time. The experienced farmer's advice is to leave the weeds where they are until the time of reaping. Then the reapers will be able to tell which is which and first pull

up the weeds and put them aside for burning. After this the true wheat can be harvested and placed in the farmer's storehouse.

Jesus had been relating his parables to the crowds that followed him everywhere, but in Matthew chapter thirteen verse thirty-six we are told: "Then He left the crowd and went into the house." Jesus' disciples had not understood the meaning of this parable of the weeds so they came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

So He begins by telling them that the sower of the good seed is one called the Son of Man. This, of course, is Jesus Himself. It is a title that the Lord often used. It is a title that identifies Him with mankind. He is indeed the Son of God, yet He is truly human. He is the Son of Man, conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary to be the Saviour of the world. He said of himself, "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which is lost." He is the one who is building his church and establishing his kingdom in human lives. So it is that the field in this story, as it does in others of Jesus' parables, represents the world. This is the world in which the Good News of Christ is being proclaimed and in which Christ's church is still growing today and will continue to grow until it is complete. Then there is the good seed. Jesus says that this represents the children of the kingdom. These are they who gladly own Christ as their Lord and Saviour. Note that they are "sown" by the Lord Jesus himself. He it is, by his Spirit, who calls them into his kingdom. The word is preached by men but it is the sovereign work of God in Christ, through the convicting of the Holy Spirit, to bring men and women to salvation and into his church. Like the good seed in this story, the children of Christ's kingdom are scattered across the world. In some places there are many together, in others they are isolated, but wherever they are they belong to the Saviour and one day will be gathered together to be with Him.

But what of the tares, that noxious, tangling weed? What do they represent? Jesus said these are "the sons of the wicked one." In other words they are the children and followers of the enemy of men's souls - Satan. In the farmer's field the wheat and the tares grew side by side. Here is a picture of the visible church in the world, consisting of true believers and those whose profession is only outward. Like the tares they appear to be genuine for a time, but their true nature is soon revealed. Tares will be found among the wheat. They create problems for the "good seed" by temptations and persecution. Hypocrites and deceivers may creep in, sown by the enemy to cause discord. The tares and the wheat will, according to this parable, grow together until the harvest, and so true believers must be on their guard against all such. But, we must be careful in our natural desire to root out such ones. There is deep truth in the saying of Augustine, "Those who are tares today, may be wheat tomorrow."

We have seen that the enemy who sows the weeds is the devil. He is called "the slanderer", "the accuser", and "the adversary." He is mentioned repeatedly in the teaching of our Lord Jesus. Satan was a high-ranking angel cast out of heaven because of his pride and rebellion against God. He is full of hatred against God and his people. Like the vicious enemy in Jesus' story, he goes about planting his poisonous weeds wherever and whenever he can. He places among God's people those who seek to deceive by their false teaching and to entangle with their man made rules and regulations.

But this great enemy, with his weapons of sin and death, was defeated at the cross where Christ, the perfect Son of God, bore the wrath of God against sinners and was raised from death on the third day. Although the enemy is still active his power has been curtailed. He has no hold on God's people and he will be finally overcome at the second coming of Christ. Satan's days are numbered.

Then there is the harvest which is the close of this age. The servants in Jesus' story were not allowed to pull out the tares straight away. They were told to leave them until it was time for the harvest to be reaped. Only then would the true wheat and the false tares be identified. At that time the tares would be separated from the wheat and burned in the fire. What a clear picture this is of the final judgement of those who are in reality without Jesus Christ as their Saviour, whose profession is only outward. They have never been born again. The Lord Jesus here refers to the eternal loss and punishment of those who come

to the day of judgement without knowing him as their Saviour. We read in verses forty-one and forty-two, "The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Jesus would never speak words like this unless what He was saying was not absolutely true. The sinless Saviour would never lie or deceive us because there is coming a day of judgement. It will be a time of separation when the "wheat" and the "tares" will be identified and will go to their appointed destinies.

What is the destiny of the sons of the kingdom, of those who are the "good seed" born again by the Spirit of God, of those who are of Christ's true church, who are clothed in the righteousness of the Lord Jesus? We read in verse forty-three: "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." God is the Father of all true Christian believers and their Father is the sovereign over all. In this age the children of God are often regarded as of little worth, They are obscured and hidden and persecuted, but on that harvest day it will be like the sun appearing from behind a dark cloud. They will appear with Christ in glory. Death defeated they will have glorious resurrection bodies and be wonderfully transformed. Jesus finishes his explanation of this parable by saying: "He who has ears, let him hear." So here is a call to self-examination. It is a call to consider very carefully where we stand before God. We have to ask ourselves the question, "Do I really love the Saviour? Am I one of his children, saved through faith in Him?" Or am I someone who is outwardly a churchgoer, with all the appearances of being a Christian, but it is only an outward show and I have no personal knowledge of Christ in my life. May I urge you, in the light of this parable, and what it teaches us, to turn to the Lord Jesus today in true repentance and faith so that on that future day you will be numbered among the children of the kingdom?

THE PARABLES NO. 11

"THE WITHERING OF THE FIG TREE"

This time we are looking at what we might call a visible parable of the Lord Jesus Christ. You will find the account of this in the Gospel according to Matthew chapter twenty-one and verses eighteen to twenty-two. This was a parable that had a twofold message for the disciples. It was a visible parable, rather than a story, because the followers of Jesus saw it for themselves and they were surprised by what they saw. Here is Matthew's record:

"Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig-tree by the road, He went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then He said to it, 'May you never bear fruit again!' Immediately the tree withered. When the disciples saw this they were amazed. They asked, 'How did the fig-tree wither so quickly?' Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig-tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask in prayer.'"

Jesus was returning to Jerusalem after spending the night in nearby Bethany, almost certainly in the home of Mary and Martha his close friends. It was about a two mile walk back to the city and we read that on the way Jesus became hungry. Here we have a glimpse of the humanity of the Saviour. Although all the fullness of God is in Him, for He is the Son of God, He is also the "Son of Man" - truly human; one of us; able to understand us. He knew what it was to be hungry and thirsty, to be homeless and hunted. He knew sadness and joy, friendship and hostility.

It was about the month of April and the time of the Passover was very near. This was the time of year when neither the earlier nor the later figs would be ripe for eating. Mark tells us that it was not the season for figs. But Jesus saw, even from a distance, that this particular fig-tree was very unusual. It had leaves on it, possibly it was in full foliage. Therefore there should have been green figs on it. So Jesus went up to it, but He found that there was nothing but leaves, no fruit at all. It had nothing to offer Him to satisfy his hunger. What followed may seem strange, but Christ never did anything without purpose or meaning, as we shall see. He said to the fruitless tree: "May you never bear fruit again!" This is the Creator Himself

speaking, the one who, with a word, made the storm cease, and immediately the fig-tree begins to wither, to shrivel and dry up.

So we have to ask the question, "Why did our Lord do this to the tree?" In the answer to this we have the first part of the object lesson that Jesus was teaching by this action. The fig-tree was an emblem of Israel. On the previous day, as recorded in Matthew chapter twenty-one verses twelve and thirteen, Jesus had driven the money-changers and merchants out of the Temple courts with the words: "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations. But you have made it a den of robbers!" He was righteously angered that his Father's house could be so defiled by those who were God's own privileged people. They were so very busy making preparations for their feasts and sacrifices, but their hearts were far away from the Lord. At the same time the priests and religious leaders were plotting to put to death the very one of whom their sacrifices spoke. The nation of Israel had plenty of leaves, as it were, but no fruit. They had much religious activity, but it had become just ritual without meaning or true significance for the majority. They were about to reject the very Messiah for whom they had waited for so long. When the Lord Jesus cleansed the Temple and cursed the fig-tree, He did two symbolic and prophetic acts with one meaning. He was actually predicting the downfall of unfruitful Israel, but He was also teaching his disciples a lesson about faith.

As the Lord passed that way the following day the disciples were astonished to see that the tree had withered and died. That which had appeared to be so healthy was now lifeless. The disciples asked Jesus: "How did the fig-tree wither so quickly?" Jesus replied: "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig-tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." Now Jesus was not suggesting that the Mount of Olives, which was four thousand feet above sea level, could be thrown into the Dead Sea. No - He was talking about the mountains of human impossibility. You only have to read the Acts of the Apostles to see God at work doing miraculous things because the early Christians prayed earnestly and believingly. Things which are impossible with man are possible with God, and they are claimed when we come to Him in confident, believing prayer. In John chapter fifteen the Lord Jesus said to his disciples: "You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit - fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." Fruit-bearing, in lives that show the love of God and are obedient to Him, and answered prayer go together.

Jesus wants his disciples to pray, but He also wants them to bear fruit. Perhaps this fig-tree, before it withered, is a picture of your life, or of your church. You might ask, 'In what way is this possible?' There have been many churches which in the past stood out and had great influence. The truth of God's word was faithfully preached, the members were very committed to Christ, there was love among them, they cared about the lost and they prayed together. They were careful about the way they lived as believers and sought to be obedient to the Scriptures in all they did. But, over time, these things were not maintained although all the activities continued and few if any realised that something was badly wrong. The branches were withering and dying. The Lord was not able to bless, they had become unfruitful and their life gone. A church may have a great profession of godliness, an outward appearance of health, and yet be fruitless, like the fig-tree in this parable. What may be true of a church may also be true in individual Christian lives. We can be very busy with religious activity and give the appearance of being spiritually healthy, when all the time we are empty within and there is no real fruit in our lives. Our Lord Jesus Christ walks among his people and He looks for fruit. He has a right to expect it! Sometimes He finds none.

So what would we say makes for a fruitful church or individual Christian? The evidence of true faith is seen in the life. As James puts it in his letter: "Faith without works is dead." Being fruitful is having a real love and commitment to our Saviour and a deep love for his people. Being fruitful is having a real concern for the spiritual health of others. A fruitful Christian will be one who is keen to tell others about Christ and

who by his or her life commends the Gospel. A fruitful life is built on the Word of God and prayer and remaining close to the Lord.

Only those who truly belong to Christ can produce this kind of fruit. When we accept Christ as our Lord and Saviour a change takes place in our lives. By nature we are all spiritually dead and fruitless towards God because of our sin. But when we turn to the Lord Jesus for salvation and fully trust in Him, we become sons and daughters of the living God. The One who cursed that fig-tree bore the curse and judgement of Almighty God for us at the cross. He whose life was so fruitful and so blessed went through death for us so that we might be forgiven and brought back to God. He who conquered death is now alive, and is by his Spirit in his people to change them into those whose lives are a reflection of his life.

If you have never done so trust Him now to forgive your sins and to transform your whole life into one that is spiritually fruitful.

THE PARABLES NO. 12

"NEW WINE IN OLD WINESKINS"

Hello. This time we are going to discover another parable of the Lord Jesus Christ found in the Gospel of Matthew chapter nine verses fourteen to seventeen. It is a parable about putting new wine into old wineskins. It all began with a question about fasting. John the Baptist's disciples approached Jesus directly, unlike the Pharisees. They asked what was really an unnecessary question. They should have known God's Word better. Their question was: "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

The only fast required by God's law in the Old Testament was on the Day of Atonement. There was, of course, an important reason why the disciples of Jesus did not need to fast, as Jesus Himself explained. He, the bridegroom was with them and they could not fast while He was with them. They would do that after He was departed. Jesus compares his presence on earth with a wedding feast. The relationship between God and his people, between Christ and his church is compared with the bond of love between a bridegroom and his bride. Just imagine friends fasting during a wedding feast. It would be unthinkable. Imagine the disciples grieving and mourning while their Master was with them. It was a time of great blessing. The point is that Jesus had ushered in a new order with signs and wonders to attest his ministry. Above all there was the message of salvation from sin. This glorious new order did not fit in with the old one of fasting appointed by men.

Then Jesus talks about new cloth and an old garment. If a new piece of wool is placed on an old garment the result will be that when this unshrunk piece becomes wet it will pull to pieces the bordering cloth of the badly worn garment. The patch that was supposed to take care of the original tear will now produce an even bigger tear. Then Jesus changes the picture and talks about not putting new wine into old wineskins. These wineskins were usually made of the skin of a goat or of a sheep. After being removed from the animal the skin was tanned, and after the hair had been removed the skin was turned inside out. The neck opening became the mouth of the bottle and the other openings were closed with cords. An old wineskin was no use for new, still fermenting wine that tends to stretch the container. The wineskin must be sufficiently elastic to cope with this. An old wineskin would be stiff and rigid and would crack and the wine would spill out.

So what does all this mean? Does the new wine represent salvation by grace in contrast to the old wine of the law? This is not what Jesus is actually referring to here. The context is one of fasting. The frequent fast was of purely human institution. There was no joy in it, no blessing. It was a formal and empty religious exercise without any value. Jesus brings the message of salvation by grace. The salvation He offers has nothing in common with these miserable fastings. In other words, all those like his disciples who know the Lord Jesus Christ, who have trusted in Him as Saviour and Lord, have tasted the new wine of

rescue and riches available to sinners. The new wine must be poured into the fresh wineskins of gratitude, freedom and spontaneous service for Christ, to the glory of God.

There is flexibility in these new wineskins, adjustments occur after the new wine has been poured in. They do not fully keep their shape. They have to adapt to certain changes that are going on. The question arises, "How are you and I adapting and adjusting to the rescue and the riches of the Gospel? If you are a Christian, one who has trusted in Jesus Christ as your Saviour, you have actually been rescued from the power of darkness. You have been rescued and brought into an eternal kingdom. Your eyes have been opened and you have come to realise the riches there are in Jesus Christ.

What bitter trials the Lord Jesus endured for our sakes. He did not drink wine vinegar on the cross but the full cup of the wrath of God that we might enjoy the new wine of a full and free salvation. We should be so grateful for that. And then there is freedom. Sinners are slaves because sin is slavery. Jesus said, "Whoever commits sin is the slave of sin." It is a terrible and destructive tyranny to be ruled and governed by our sin. But Christians know the rescue and the riches of this new wine. They are no longer slaves. They are free to serve a new master and free to lead a new life. They are free to sing a new song and to experience a new peace and joy. Christians are free to develop a new relationship with Christ, to grow in grace and the knowledge of God. They are free to enjoy God's word.

The new wine also speaks of spontaneous service to the glory of God. Someone has said that where hearts burn for the Lord, hands will be busy for the Lord. The Pharisees did not serve the Lord, they had just a dead, formal religion. Jesus said to them, "You search the scriptures for in them you think that you have eternal life." We are not to be like those hardened old wineskins. God's Word must affect us continually. Are you receptive to God's Word? Are you eager to live in ready obedience to the Lord? What difference will this parable make to your life? In what ways do you serve the Lord? There is more to Christian stewardship than giving money, though we should give to the Lord's work. Christ has the right to our whole lives.

The final result of this new wine is joy. Matthew Henry, wrote many years ago, "When Christ is with them, (the church) the candle of God shines upon their head and all is well. When He is withdrawn for but a small moment they are troubled and walk heavily. The presence and nearness of the Son makes day and summer; his absence and distance, night and winter. Christ is all in all, the church's joy." Paul tells us we should rejoice always. Rejoicing is a Christian duty, it is therefore an evidence of the blessedness of the new covenant. Because Jesus Christ has suffered for us we can rejoice. We are encouraged to rejoice. We are commanded to rejoice and we are enabled to rejoice. Rejoicing is the personal, permanent duty of God's people.

May you know much of the joy and blessing of the new wine of Jesus Christ in the days that lie ahead.

THE PARABLES NO. 13

"THE TWO BUILDERS"

This time we come to the last in our "Discovery" series looking at the parables of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are going to look at the story of "The Wise and Foolish Builders." This is found in the Gospel of Luke chapter six verses forty-six to forty-nine. Jesus had been teaching the people and He challenged them with a question as He began his parable:

"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundations on rock. When the flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete."

This parable comes at the end of Jesus' teaching of his disciples and the great number of people who had come to hear Him from all over Judea and further afield. He had been speaking about four blessings: for those who are poor, those who hunger, those who weep and those who are persecuted for Son of Man's sake. He followed this with four woes or warnings for those whose circumstances are just the opposite: those who are rich, who are well fed, who are full of laughter and are well thought of by all. The blessings are for those who belong to the kingdom of God. The warnings are for those who are outside God's kingdom and care little about it. For those of the kingdom there will come a day of rejoicing and reward. For those who have lived for themselves there will come a day of accounting.

Jesus continued his teaching on the life-style of the children of the kingdom by telling them that they should love their enemies and do good to them. He told them not to be judgmental of others and to be generous towards all. This was in great contrast to the life-style of the world around them. He concluded his teaching by telling them that God's people are to be like a tree that produces good fruit. There are many who claim to be Christians, but it is not evident in their lives. In other words they do not put Jesus' teaching into practice. Jesus said, in verse forty-five, it is really all a matter of the heart. Humanity has heart trouble, because the heart of man is sinful and desperately wicked. If the heart is not right then the life will not be right either. Jesus said, "The good man - that is the one whose sins have been forgiven - brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man - the one who has never turned to God in repentance - brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart." Each tree is recognised by its own fruit.

So Jesus comes to this parable of the wise and foolish builders. He begins with a question to challenge his hearers as it challenges us today: "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" There are many religious people who call Christ 'Lord' and would say they owe allegiance to Him. But although they honour Him with their lips, they deny Him as Lord by the way they live. They are disobedient and do not take his word to their hearts and live according to his teaching. So Jesus asks this question because among those listening there were those who were deceiving themselves. Their following after Christ was just an outward show with no inward reality. Jesus was not their Lord at all. Like many today, their religion did not touch their behaviour. Jesus knew who were his true disciples and He certainly knew those who were not, as this question clearly shows.

Now Jesus goes on to show what the true, obedient Christian believer is like, what he resembles. The Lord wants his hearers to listen very carefully, and his parable will make the meaning of all this very clear. He says to them, in verse forty-seven: "I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice."

This is not just a simple story for children, its message is actually very important. It goes to the very heart of the Gospel. Jesus describes the actions of a builder and we can all imagine the scene. It is a beautiful day and there is a blue, cloudless sky, warm sunshine - perfect weather. The builder has been planning and preparing to build himself a fine house. He has bought the land, it is in a good position. He has been careful and cautious in his choice. He knows that the warm, summer weather will not last for ever. This is his day of opportunity and if he wants a house that will be ready for the rainy season he must start building now. How does he build? He works away digging the foundations deep down into the solid rock. It is back-breaking, hard work in the hot sun, but he keeps at it day after day. He makes no attempt to start building until he has finished laying the foundations.

Now imagine this man's neighbour. He too is out enjoying the sunshine and is watching with some amusement as the other man labours away making sure that the foundations for his new house go deep and onto the rock. The second man sees no need for such exertion or careful preparation. He too is going to build a new house, but he's not going to waste the summer doing it, and he is certainly not going to all the trouble that his neighbour has. He thinks he knows better, but he is wrong. In due course this second

man, this building expert, or so he thinks, finds a perfect place with a beautiful view and just builds his house there. In no time at all he is admiring his new home and living in it.

The wise builder was so particular. He was very concerned to get everything right and worked hard at it. The foolish builder ignored the need for a good foundation. He knew better and he didn't want all the work involved in that, so he did it his way. Both men saw the need to build and both knew how to construct a house and to all outward appearances both buildings were sound and good. But outward appearances were not good enough. Now remember that this parable of Jesus is really about the way people respond to his teaching. There are people who outwardly appear to be fine and wanting to build a good, decent, even religious life. But inwardly they want to do things their way and they take no heed to the teaching of the Lord. We are reminded in the Bible that God does not look at the outward appearance, but on the heart. He sees the hidden, secret motives.

The summer was soon past and winter came along with the winds and heavy rains. One day there is a violent storm and it rains and it rains. Rivulets descend from the hills, they merge and form a torrent and both houses face the full fury of the flood. After this onslaught only one of the houses remains standing. The house without foundations has been easily swept away and nothing was left. It was completely gone. The flood could not shake the wise builder's house because it was well built on the solid foundation. This wise builder, Jesus says, is a picture of the person who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. He represents the person who builds on a true foundation. He is the one who rests on the "Rock of Ages", Jesus Christ. He is the one in whose heart there has been a real repentance for sin. He is the one who has digged deep, as it were. He has thought deeply, is concerned for his soul and has sought the Lord earnestly. He has realised that his eternal salvation depends on his hearing and obeying the word of Christ. To dig deep we have to bow low in humility, not trusting in ourselves, but in the Saviour.

The Bible tells us that there is a great crisis coming eventually to everyone - the Day of Judgement. There are of course many crises and trials throughout life. There are temptations and sorrows, disappointments and heartaches, but the great crisis comes to all. The Bible says that it is appointed to all to die and after that the judgement. Oh, what a storm that will be! The fact is that the storm of God's anger against our sin fell upon the Lord Jesus at Calvary's cross. There He bore the punishment for the sins of the world, especially for all those who would come to put their trust in Him. The wise builder is safe from the wrath and judgement of God. That day will be for him a day of triumph and safety.

There is a sense in which we are all building. We are all building a life. How are you building your life? Can you say with the hymn writer: "On Christ, the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand"? Are you building your life according to the Word of God? There are only two kinds of builder in the world, the wise and the foolish. The wise hear the words of Jesus and obey them. The foolish hear his words and ignore them.

At the heart of this parable is the matter of obedience. Jesus says, "But why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and do not do what I say?" He wants us to do the things that He says. He wants us to live in obedience to Him. May He help you to build your life wisely and carefully on the solid foundation of faith in Him and obedience to his word.

