

The Parables of Jesus

Date	Title	Parable of the ...	Matthew	Mark	Luke
20 th May 2007	The Key to all Parables: Sower & seed	Sower / Soils	13:1-23	4:1-20	8:4-15
27 th May 2007	Kingdom Ministry: Seeds, Wheat & Weeds	Weeds	13:24-30	-	-
		Growing Seed	-	4:26-29	-
		Mustard Seed	13:31-32	4:30-32	13:18-19
10 th June 2007	Joy in strange places: Lost & Found	Lost Sheep	18:12-14	-	15:3-7
		Lost Coin	-	-	15:8-10
		Lost Son	-	-	15:11-32
24 th June 2007	Watch & Be Ready: Master or bridegroom?	Wise & Faithful Servants	24:45-51	-	12:42-48
		Ten Virgins	25:1-13	-	-
		Talents	25:14-30	-	-

The word *parable* is a transliteration into English of the Greek word *parabolē*, which means literally “placing side by side”. The emphasis in the word is therefore on the fact that the words of the parable convey meaning through parallel rather than plainly. The word “parable” is used in the Gospels to describe many different forms of teachings of Jesus including:

- **Short paradoxical statements** (e.g. Mark 7:14-17)
- **Proverbs** (e.g. Luke 4:23, Greek *parabolē* is translated *proverb* in the NIV)
- **Stories either short** (e.g. Matthew 13:33) **or longer** (e.g. Matthew 21:33-41)

Many similar short sayings or full length stories are usually classified as parables even though the Gospel writers do not explicitly describe them as such (e.g. Mark 9:50; Luke 10:30-37). The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) all contain parables, although they are largely absent from John’s record. Parables are not the same as myths or fables (stories which distort reality to convey a meaning or moral).

Principles for Understanding the Parables

1. Parables are not allegories: they usually convey one major point

Parables are not allegories but are intended to draw the hearer in through “points of reference”. An allegory is a story whose meaning is found in understanding the significance of the different people, things and events in the story and which may not therefore actually be true to real life (for example the Pilgrim’s Progress). In an allegory every detail has a hidden meaning. A parable is a statement or story that is true to every day life but which conveys some aspect or aspects of truth about spiritual realities, therefore many details may not have a specific hidden meaning but the story as a whole will have a meaning. Allegory was a popular way to read the Bible, especially the parables, in the early church (in fact Jesus did use allegory in His teaching – largely recorded in John for example when He described Himself as the Good Shepherd in Ch 10 and as the True Vine in Ch 15). Fee and Stuart in their excellent book, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth* (Scripture Union) quote this example of how Augustine, a great leader and theologian of the early church, explained the Parable of the Good Samaritan:

- *The travelling man* = Adam
- *Jerusalem* = the heavenly city of peace from which Adam fell
- *Jericho* = the moon, representing Adam’s mortality
- *Thieves* = the devil and his angels
- *Stripped him* = robbed him of his immortality
- *Beat him* = by persuading him to sin
- *Left him half-dead* = half-dead because he is alive physically but dead spiritually
- *Priest and Levite* = the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament
- *Samaritan* = Christ (he says the word means “Guardian”)
- *Bound his wounds* = binding the restraint of sin
- *Oil* = comfort of good hope
- *Wine* = exhortation to work with a fervent spirit
- *Beast* = the body of Christ’s incarnation

- *Inn* = the church
- *Tomorrow* = after the Resurrection
- *Two-pence* = promise of this life and the life to come
- *Innkeeper* = Paul

Of course this is not at all what Christ intended in telling the story, and may seem extreme to us, but we are also in danger of taking the same approach to reading the parables. We must not look for hidden meaning in every detail of the story. Instead we should ask ourselves what is the point of the story as a whole? What truth did Jesus intend to communicate to His hearers? The best way to understand the meaning is to put ourselves in the position of the original hearer(s). Who did Jesus tell it to? What introduces the parable (is there a question or an event that led to Jesus telling it)? We must translate the point of the parable into our own context, and this may include finding a parallel situation to the one described in the story that is meaningful for us.

Every parable has at least one element, sometimes more, that represents things in the real world, and these can be called *points of reference*. Their purpose is to draw us into the parable. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, there are a few:

- The helpless situation of the man – we can identify with the need to receive mercy
- The Priest and Levite
- The Samaritan

We cannot examine the significance of these points of reference in detail here, but we can say that the other details like the donkey, the inn and the money are only details fleshing out the story. We must be careful, then, not to dismiss allegorical readings of parables outright, since some of the parables (*The Parable of the Sower* being a prime example) are largely allegorical. However, the meaning must relate to the context in which the parable was told and the overall ministry of Christ. Normally the clues to understanding the parable will be found in the parable itself or the discussions surrounding it. Allegorical explanations that stretch beyond the immediate context of Christ's ministry are highly dubious. Where we make conclusions about hidden meanings of details in a parable that are not specifically identified in Scripture we must be careful not to be too dogmatic about their significance or to lose the main message of the parable in the midst of them.

2. Parables are not obscure: they connect Kingdom truths with everyday principles

Although parables may be initially difficult to understand, it was Jesus' intention that through them those who approach them with faith would understand important truths. Parables do have meaning, and the meaning of any parable will be about the nature of the Kingdom of God. The parable connects this principle about God's Kingdom into the lives of the hearer by relating it to a principle of everyday life. When I was a child in Sunday School we were taught this concept in simple terms that a parable is: "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning". Parables make a connection between the reality of how things work in our everyday experience and what God's Kingdom is like. They can make this connection through contrast (e.g. the parable of the persistent widow) or through similarity (e.g. the parable of the sower). To understand the parables we must seek to understand the meaning of God's Kingdom in the teaching of Christ and in fact the message of the Bible, and especially the fact that the Kingdom is "now, but not yet" (present in Christ and His church but still to be consummated in the future when He returns in power). Many parables begin with the words, "The Kingdom of God is like ..." We must understand that this does not mean that the Kingdom is like the item immediately following this introduction, but that the point of the parable illustrates a point about how the Kingdom operates.

3. Parables are not entertainment: they expect a response

One of the reasons Jesus taught in parables was to challenge people to think about the meaning of the story. Some people may have come to Jesus expecting to hear meaty theological sermons and would go away baffled and disappointed by the simple stories he told. No one could understand the parables unless they dedicated themselves to making the connection between the point of the story and their own lives. In this sense the parables are much more than just illustrations of a point – they are intended both to filter out those who were not serious about listening and are also a way to bring God's truth to life in the hearts of those who heard and understood. There will be a variety of applications of the main point of the parable depending on how the hearer relates to the story. The same parable may speak comfort or judgement to different people depending on how they connect to the story. To some the Kingdom means judgement and a call to repentance and to others it means hope and an assurance of grace.

The Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15

This parable has been given various names including *The Parable of the Seed* (since the seed is the most active thing in the story, not the sower) and *The Parable of the Soils* (since it is the differences in the soils that determines the different outcomes), but since Jesus gave it the name *The Parable of the Sower* (Matthew 13:18) we will call it that. It is one of only three parables found in all three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), the others being the *Parable of the Mustard Seed* and *The Parable of the Tenants*.

In understanding this parable we have a huge advantage in that Christ Himself interprets it for us (there is only one other parable for which we have a record of Jesus interpreting it – *The Parable of the Weeds* in Matthew 13:36-43). We know exactly what the points of reference in the story are. Interestingly, though, Christ does not spell out the point of the parable to the disciples. He simply explains the points of reference so that they can enter fully into the story. To explain the point of a parable is a little like explaining a joke – it loses its impact on the hearer.

Points of reference

Jesus specifically identifies several points of reference in this parable:

- *The Farmer* – anyone who sows the word of God. In other words, the person who teaches the Gospel. The immediate reference is to Christ, but the disciples will take on this role of being the farmer themselves.
- *The Seed* – represents *the message about the Kingdom of God* (Matthew) or *the word of God* (Mark & Luke).
- *The birds* – represent Satan.
- *The four kinds of soil* – represent the different responses people make to the story.

The following table summarises the four kinds of soil:

Soil	Result	Meaning	Heart	Enemy
Path	Trampled on (Luke) & birds ate it (all)	They do not understand the word and the evil one (Satan) comes and snatches it away. His aim is that they may not believe and be saved (Luke).	Hard	Devil
Rocky places with little soil	Sprang up quickly but scorched by sun because had no root (Matt / Mark) / no moisture (Luke)	They hear and receive it at once with joy but fall away when persecuted or facing trouble (in the time of testing – Luke) because of the word.	Shallow	Flesh
Thorny ground	Thorns grew and choked the plants	They hear the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. They do not mature (Luke).	Distracted	World
Good soil	Crop – 100, 60 or 30 times (Matt / Mark), Luke only 100 times	They hear the word and understand (Matthew) or accept (Mark) it and as a result produce a crop. This is because they have a noble and good heart (Luke). They, "Hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop" (Luke 8:15).	Fruitful	-

It is important to emphasise that it is not the way the sower sows that varies and that results in different outcomes, but the pre-existing nature of the soils. The sower's job is simply to broadcast the seed faithfully, and the outcome is then beyond his control.

Why use parables?

Jesus ends this parable with a challenge: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Matthew 13:9; Mark 4:9; Luke 8:8). This is not the only time He used this saying, and it is also recorded in: Matthew 11:15, 13:43; Mark 4:23; Luke 14:35; and three times in the letters of Jesus to the churches in Revelation 2 (vv7, 11 & 17). However, there is another Old Testament reference to a similar concept in Ezekiel 12:2.

The Lord says to Ezekiel that he is living among a rebellious people who have eyes but do not see and ears but do not hear. In that context God commands Ezekiel to use a dramatic presentation of truth by acting out an image of the Exile. Only those who asked Ezekiel for an explanation would receive one. Ezekiel's dramatic presentations of God's message are a parallel to Jesus' parables.

After Jesus had told this parable His disciples came to Him privately and asked Him why He taught the people so often in parables. Jesus' reply is found in Matthew 13:11-17, Mark 4:11-12 and Luke 8:10. Matthew's account is the longest, and the comments here will be based mainly on his record.

Jesus' answer begins with the comment that the disciples have been given the knowledge of the secret(s) (Greek *mysterion* in v.11) of the Kingdom, but not to the other people ("those on the outside" Mark 4:11). The idea of this "secret", is mentioned by Jesus only in this context (He does not use the word anywhere else in His recorded words, although Paul uses it 21 times and Revelation a further four), and does not so much mean something that is hidden from most people for only a few people to know as something that was previously not revealed but has now been revealed by God. Certainly that is the meaning that Paul gives to the mystery he proclaimed (see Romans 16:25). It is important to note that in this section Jesus does not speak about how people become a disciple or how they are admitted to knowing the "secrets" of the Kingdom. To understand His teaching about that we would need to consider passages like Matthew 5, John 3 or Matthew 18. Jesus simply describes the different realities of people who understand the secrets of the Kingdom and those who don't. In the same way, the parable does not explain how one type of soil changes into another (or even whether they can change), it simply describes the different results when seed falls on these different kinds of soil.

Jesus continues to say that whoever has will receive more, but whoever does not have will have even what he has taken from him (Matthew 13:12) and, "This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing they do not see; though hearing they do not understand'" (Mt 13:13). Mark adds the additional words from Isaiah, "Otherwise they might turn and be forgiven" (Mark 4:12). Jesus explains that the response of those who do not grasp the meaning of the parables fulfils a prophecy from Isaiah 6:9-10. The disciples are blessed because they see and hear (Matthew 13:16) but those who *do not* understand *cannot* understand because their hearts are already hardened (Matthew 13:15). Again we must remember that Jesus is not saying that it is impossible for these people to become believers, but in the absence of a change of heart (repentance and the operation of the Holy Spirit) this can never happen. So, then, when Jesus used parables He had the dual purpose of revealing truth to those who had genuine faith in Him (who had received the secret of the Kingdom) and of protecting the "pearls" of His teaching from those who would only crush them underfoot (the proverbial pigs of Matthew 7:6). In a sense He was allowing those people who came to see Him for wrong motives – either because they wanted to judge and trap Him or because they were simply seeking to be entertained or to get what they wanted from Him – to escape or perhaps miss the challenge of His words. Those who in humility and faith eagerly sought to follow Him would ponder His words and even (like the disciples in this passage) come to Him for clarification, whilst the others would simply dismiss these "riddles" and await what they really wanted to hear and see.

The Point:

In Mark 4:13 Jesus asks the disciples: "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?" He then proceeds to explain the parable for them, or at least to explain the points of reference. In one sense this *Parable of the Sower* could be called the key to all parables since it is a "parable about parables" or more correctly a parable about how people respond to the teaching of Christ. If they cannot understand even this parable they will be unable to understand any parable. Thankfully, however, they have come to the right place and Jesus teaches them what the parable is really about. We don't know how many times He did this, but we are reminded that Jesus' intention was that those who had faith in Him and who would surrender all else to follow Him would be able to understand the parables. So, then, what is the point of this parable? There are two main suggestions:

A] It is the *Parable of the Soils* – the point is to challenge the hearer about what kind of soil they are.

According to this view the point is about the urgency of hearing and responding to Christ's message. The hearer should ask himself what type of soil he is – is he genuinely seeking Christ in faith or is he hard, shallow or distracted? The problem with this suggestion is that those people who are in one of

the first three groups of soils would not even grasp the truth of this parable at that level. They are not likely to recognise themselves as one of these kinds of soil. There is no suggestion in the parable or explanation that it is a challenge to encourage people to be more serious about discipleship or to keep persevering. Although Jesus may have challenged His hearers to put His words into action (Matthew 7:24-27) and to count the cost of discipleship (Matthew 16:24-26) elsewhere, this is not such an occasion and a parable would not be the chosen method of communication.

B] It is the *Parable of the Sower* – the point is to help the disciples to understand what to expect when the word is preached.

According to this view the point is simply that there will be different kinds of responses to the communication of God's truth and that this is to be expected. The parable is, then, part of Jesus' training of His disciples for Kingdom ministry. This understanding fits the context of the parable much better. The four responses are what the disciples should expect to see as Jesus teaches the crowds, and later as they themselves proclaim the good news. Not everyone will believe (some will be completely deaf to the message), and even those who appear to believe may not follow through to produce a harvest. Some will make initial professions but will fall away when persecution comes, and others will seem to make some initial progress but will get distracted by worldly concerns and the love of money. It is worth remembering that Jesus' disciples to whom He explains this parable are not only the Twelve, but the wider circle of His followers, but that even among the Twelve is one (Judas Iscariot) who will fall away precisely because persecution is coming and because of his love of money. Perhaps this is why Jesus Himself describes it as the *Parable of the Sower* (Matthew 13:18), since He is training potential sowers, although most commentators prefer to major on the difference between the soils.

Of course, in the final analysis both points are relevant applications. Perhaps this parable will speak differently to different hearers depending on the point of reference that draws them in. Perhaps through this parable some people may realise that they have been one of the three kinds of unfruitful soil and so will come to repentance. However, the primary point must surely be to encourage those who minister God's word that they must remain faithful as sowers. They must communicate the Word faithfully, relevantly and with conviction, understanding that the results are beyond their control but are a matter for the hearers and the Spirit of God. As we seek to communicate the truth of God's word today we should also expect the same four responses:

- **Some will be hard** – they have already rejected the possibility that God may speak to them and so are incapable of hearing His voice. Satan can easily snatch the seed away from their hearts.
- **Some will be shallow** – they will initially make an emotional response to the Gospel, professing faith in Christ, but when they realise there is a cost to be paid and that discipleship means sacrifice and potential persecution they will wither away.
- **Some will be distracted** – they too will profess faith, but as time passes it will be clear that the seed of God's word is competing in their heart with other priorities – perhaps career, pleasure, money or even relationships. When this situation arises, the thorns, which were after all there first, will always choke the seed.
- **Some will bear a harvest** – these people will accept and believe the word, and their lives will be transformed as a result. They will become the source of new seed to spread the word to others. The fruit that is produced may include effective witnessing to others (Colossians 1:6), good deeds (Colossians 1:10), transformation of character (Galatians 5:22; Ephesians 5:9; Philippians 1:11) and praise to God (Hebrews 13:15). In the parable there are different degrees of fruit, and this is also true in real life, although we have no basis in the parable for suggesting why that may be (nor can we take time to discuss this now). The simple fact is, though, that every believer is to be expected to bear fruit.

The one who preaches the Gospel should realise that it is not His job to change the hearts of those who hear – only the Holy Spirit of God can do that – and must commit the outcome to God. We have no cause to boast if many are saved through our ministry and should not necessarily despair if few are (so long as we are sure we are faithful to the word and relevant in our means of communication). Results in God's Kingdom do not depend on our technique but on the power of God's word at work in the good soil of believing hearts. Too much preaching today leaves the word of God on the periphery or focuses on experience and opinion. It is the word that is the source of power and our preaching must always be preaching of the word!

Two further questions may be asked about the application of these truths:

(i) Which of the soils are truly saved?

Some have suggested that only the good soil represents a person who is truly saved, while others have suggested that all but the first one were genuine believers since the seed grew at least initially. All are agreed that the first soil (the hard ground on the path) must represent people who are not truly saved at all (since Luke 8:12 makes this clear). Of course our position on this matter also depends on our theological position regarding eternal security – is it possible to be saved and lost? I am convinced that only the fourth soil, which bore the harvest, represents the regenerate, those who are true disciples of Christ. This understanding is best in keeping with the New Testament expectation that all true believers will persevere (perseverance and transformation is the evidence of salvation), that all true believers will bear fruit (John 15:5) and that true faith will necessarily show itself in deeds (James 2:26). Comprehending this fact should cause us to re-evaluate our approach to evangelism. We must understand that not everyone who professes faith in Christ (or who prays a prayer) will be genuinely saved. The last three kinds of soil could not be distinguished from one another initially, and in fact the shallow soil may have looked at first like the most promising as the plant sprouted up quickly. When we have evangelistic meetings we must not be too quick to say that *x number* of people became Christians, as some who “come forward” or “raise a hand” may not even intend to profess faith and may simply have questions. Even among those who do appear to be genuine and profess faith some may not truly have believed. Of course we must exercise wisdom in these matters, and in the final analysis we will not be the judge (as we will see in later parables it is only in the final judgement that all will be made clear). Often we must baptise people and accept them into church membership on the strength of their profession (Scripture gives us no warrant to wait until they show fruit before we do this), but we must always expect that some (perhaps even those who seemed to believe with great joy at first) will later fall away, showing themselves to have been the shallow or thorny ground (this is one reason why church discipline is vital). How often are we shocked when people fall away as if it was unexpected to us? How often do we practice unbiblical models of evangelism and conversion? Let us base our practice on the realities of Kingdom ministry as Christ presents them in this parable.

(ii) Is the parable also relevant to the responses believers make to the word?

I maintain that the primary application of this parable is to evangelism – the four responses are responses we will see among different people as they hear the gospel. However, the principle of different responses could also be extended to consider how we respond to every aspect of God’s truth as it is proclaimed to us. In every case we must be sure to respond in faith and to follow through in obedience as God gives us strength. Although this is a valid point, it is not the immediate message of this parable and there are better Scriptures to turn to for an emphasis on the response of believers to the word of God.

We can, therefore, summarise the point of this parable thus:

Kingdom ministry is the faithful teaching of God's word, which will result in different outcomes depending on the condition of the heart of the hearer.

So, then, we must keep on going in sharing the good news about Jesus even when the results are mixed with confidence that God’s word is living and active (just like seed) and can transform lives.

A modern-day equivalent?

The following story is an attempt at an up-dated version of the *Parable of the Sower*, with the same four responses that Jesus spoke of. We could call it *The Parable of the Telesales Pharmacist*:

Gavin was just a final year pharmacy student. He didn’t own a huge company or have lots of qualifications, but he knew that he had discovered something special. He had stumbled upon it by accident when he was working on a practical project for his course. At first he could hardly believe it, but when he tested it on his aging grandmother he was convinced. Within days of beginning the course of drugs she began to lose the wrinkles from her face and she was able to straighten up and walk without the stick that had been her companion for the last ten years or so. She even persuaded several of her friends to try it, and the results were overwhelmingly positive. Gavin had discovered an antidote to aging! It wasn’t even that expensive or difficult to make. He wanted to make it available to people at the lowest possible price, just enough to cover costs, and he knew that any drug company he approached would just want to make a killing on it, so he came up with the idea of selling it through direct

telephone sales. He got out the phone book and began to dial each number in turn, asking for the owner of the house.

Gavin dialled the first number, and he could hear that someone had answered. He began to say, "Hello, could I speak to the owner of the ... beep ..." Before he could even finish the question the anonymous person at the other end hung up. They had been sufficiently annoyed with cold callers before not to even begin to listen.

"Oh well," Gavin thought, "I'd better try again". The second call went decidedly better than the first. A pleasant sounding lady answered, and she listened as Gavin explained the nature of his new product. Gavin explained, "It could help you to live thirty, sixty or even one hundred years longer". "Really?" asked the lady excitedly, "I simply must have it. I'm so excited – this is what I've been waiting for. When can you deliver it?" "Well," Gavin replied, "I could have a batch ready tomorrow, but I would really need to receive payment before I post it out to you. We've tried to keep the cost as low as possible, and a full course only costs one thousand pounds". "Payment?!? One thousand pounds?!?" exclaimed an indignant female voice, "Who said anything about paying? If it isn't free I'm just not interested!" "But, it's really worth it – only one thousand pounds for an extra 30 to 100 years of life", Gavin exclaimed, but by the time he had finished the sentence the line was dead.

Gavin felt like giving up. He had invested all his savings in this product, and it really worked! It hurt him to think that people weren't even prepared to pay £1000 to have it. If only they could understand the real value. He decided to try one more time. He dialled another number and this time a man answered, and to Gavin's surprise he was interested. Gavin was quick to mention the cost up front this time, afraid that the man would be put off, but the response was very different from the lady: "Only £1000? That's only about ... 10 to 30 pounds per year of extra life! Sounds great: I'll take it". "Great," said Gavin, "Now I have to explain that there is one serious interaction with this new drug. On its own it has no known side effects, but if you take it together with even a small amount of alcohol the result may be serious liver failure". "What?" an angry male voice said, "No alcohol? No way!" The sound of the receiver crashing down almost deafened Gavin. He couldn't believe that this man could care more about being able to have a drink or two than living longer and healthier.

Exasperated, Gavin phoned his granny: "Nan, it's pointless, no one wants to buy my drug. If only they would take it their lives would be so much better. But it just won't work: I'm going to give up". There was a brief pause, just long enough for Gavin to identify the music of *The Blue Danube* playing in the background. Then his grandmother, sounding only slightly breathless, replied: "Never, ever give up! Some will take it. They will pay the price, quit the booze and finish the course, and they'll be waltzing when they're 100 just like me!"

By considering this story we can illustrate further the principles of interpreting parables. If this was an allegory you would be trying to figure out the meaning and significance of each of the following:

- Who is Gavin and what does his name signify?
- Who is the grandmother?
- What is the grandmother's stick?
- Why did Gavin decide on telephone sales?
- What is the significance of the £1000 price tag for the drug?
- Why the different amounts of extra life (what do these three figures represent)?
- What does the grandmother's waltz represent?

To try and analyse all of these details would be pointless, since I can tell you that there is no definite answer (I didn't assign a special meaning to any of them when I wrote this story – they are simply details to flesh out the story) and would also lead to you missing the whole point! This story is meant to illustrate something about the nature of gospel ministry. It should draw you in for two reasons:

- Because you have experienced cold-callers on your telephone before (just as Jesus' hearers were familiar with the process of farming)
- Because you live in a society that is deeply troubled by aging (just as First Century Galilee was deeply concerned about effective farming).

The simple fact is that Gavin's drug, just like the gospel, works. His challenge is to get the message across to others. If it's going to be effective for them they must pay the price, quit alcohol and finish the course. Gavin comes across four responses:

- *His grandmother and her friends* – they take the drug and reap the benefits. Gavin's grandmother predicts that others will follow.
- *The first person he called* – refused to even listen. This person was hard – they had made up their mind already.
- *The second person* – listened and was excited to begin with but when she realised there was a cost she gave up interest.
- *The third person* – he is about to buy it when he realises that he would have to give up alcohol to take the drug. Put simply, something else was more important to him (the fact that it is his right to drink alcohol is not intended to be a reference to real life and the gospel).

The responses don't depend on Gavin's delivery or the efficacy of the drug but on the prior attitudes of the different people he called.

The Parable of the Weeds

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

This is the only other parable in addition to *The Parable of the Sower* for which we have an explanation in the words of Christ. Indeed in Matthew's Gospel it comes immediately after *The Parable of the Sower*. Of course, Christ may have explained many other parables to His disciples (Mark 4:34 seems to suggest that He did explain most or all of the parables in private to them), but these are the only two for which the Spirit led the Gospel writers to record His explanations.

"The Kingdom of Heaven is like ..."

Unlike *The Parable of the Sower*, Jesus introduces this parable with the phrase that prefixes most of the parables: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like ..." It should be noted that Matthew uses the word "Heaven" where Mark and Luke use the phrase "Kingdom of God", but the two phrases are synonymous. It has been suggested that because Matthew was writing to an audience of largely Jewish believers he avoided using the name of God too freely as this would have been sensitive to his readers, whereas Mark and Luke's largely Gentile readership would not have struggled with this. Again we must remember that this phrase does not mean that the Kingdom of Heaven is like the item that comes immediately after it (in this case that would mean the Kingdom is like the man in the story) but that the parable as a whole is going to teach them something about the nature of the Kingdom.

The story

In this parable we meet a sower again. He owns a field, and he sows "good seed" in it. However this farmer had an enemy and under the cover of darkness "while everyone was sleeping", he came and sowed weeds (presumably the darnel plant that looks similar to wheat until the ears of grain appear) among the wheat and then left. Eventually the wheat sprouted up and formed ears and the weeds appeared in among it to the surprise of the farmer's servants. They ask their master where the weeds came from, and he seems quite aware that this was a deliberate act of sabotage by his enemy. The servants ask if they should go and pull the weeds out, but the farmer knew that this would only risk losing some of the wheat and so he told them to leave both growing side by side in the field until the harvest time. Then he would tell his harvesters to collect the weeds first, tying them in bundles to be burned, and then gather the wheat into his barn.

A common misunderstanding

This parable has often been explained as referring to the Church. The suggestion is that the field is the visible Church (or the Kingdom of God) and that within it there are both true believers (the wheat) and false believers (the weeds). The point of the parable would then be to explain that this state of affairs is inevitable, and presumably that church leaders should therefore not try to achieve a local church consisting only of true believers, but that Christ will resolve the problem in the final judgement. Now, it is true that there are true believers and people who have made a false profession of faith in Christ, and it is certainly true that the visible church (or organised local churches) includes both, but there is one major problem with this reading of the parable: it doesn't fit with Jesus' own explanation of the parable! To use this parable as a justification for inaction from church leaders about a mixed membership of the church would be to distort its meaning and to ignore everything else that the New Testament teaches about church membership and leadership.

Jesus' explanation

Christ's explanation of the parable happens in a private house in response to the disciples' question, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field" (v36). The Lord explains the following points of reference (vv37-39):

- *The sower* – the Son of Man (Jesus)
- *The field* – the world (not the Church or the Kingdom as in the explanation above)
- *The good seed* – the sons of the Kingdom
- *The weeds* – the sons of the evil one

- *The enemy* – the devil
- *The harvest* – the end of the age
- *The harvesters* – angels

Then Christ continues to explain the significance of the final judgement at the end of the age. The Son of Man (Jesus) is the judge and He will send out His angels as agents of the judgement. It is worth noting that this parable speaks of Jesus in divine terms as He is the owner of the field (the world) and the judge, and the angels are described as "His angels". In the final judgement the angels will weed out of the field "everything that causes sin and all who do evil" so that only the sons of the Kingdom remain. The ones who are weeded out will face judgement and punishment, described as the "fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth", and the sons of the Kingdom, also described as "the righteous", will be left to "shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father". Christ ended this explanation with a challenge to understand and apply its truth: "He who has ears, let him hear".

The Point

This simple parable has several challenges for the hearer, but it is essentially (as all the parables are) a lesson in the nature of the Kingdom of God. Although there is a sower and seed in this parable, we must not expect that they represent exactly the same realities or must function in the same way in this parable as in *The Parable of the Sower*. There is no mention of different soils or of different degrees of fruitfulness in this parable, and the message of the story is different.

Two competing fathers

According to this parable there are two competing fathers in the world – God and the devil. Citizens of the Kingdom of God are described in the parable as "sons of the Kingdom" (v38) and later God is described as their Father (v43). Christ is speaking of the new privilege of those who believe in Him to be called the children of God (John 1:12) and the new relationship that believers have with God as Father expressed in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:5-15). On the other hand, those who are described as weeds are called the "sons of the evil one". This language seem challenging and perhaps even offensive to our modern ears, but Christ elsewhere described those who did not believe His message as belonging to their father the devil (John 8:44), and the Scriptures are clear in describing the conflict between two Kingdoms, elsewhere described as the dominion of darkness and the Kingdom of the Son (Colossians 1:13). There is a real spiritual battle in our world, and Satan is active in leading as many people to destruction with him as he can. Those people who do not know God through Christ Jesus are spiritually dead, lost, blind, children of the devil. They may not realise it, but they will share in his inheritance, which is judgement. There are only two allegiances (Luke 11:23). Once again we must remember that any parable is limited in its description of ultimate realities, and this parable does not explain how a person becomes a "child of the Kingdom", which is a supernatural transformation of the nature just as transforming one type of seed into another would be. It would be beyond the limits of this parable to talk about whether people are predestined to be either wheat or weeds or to what degree this depends upon their own choice, and we must look elsewhere in Scripture to reach a firm conclusion about those questions.

The Kingdom is "now but not yet"

The disciples had expectations that Christ would initiate the Kingdom of God, but for them that meant He would march into Jerusalem, overthrowing the Romans, and anyone else who got in the way, and establish His reign from the holy city extending right across the world. This parable presents a very different view of the Kingdom. It will not take over the world, but will grow within the world side by side with the work of Satan until the final judgement. Christ is preparing His disciples, if they have ears to hear, for the nature of His Kingdom. As we read further in Matthew's Gospel, however, we discover that they were apparently unable to grasp this fact. The New Testament presents the Kingdom of God as "now but not yet". The Kingdom entered into our world in the person of Christ, who declared that "the Kingdom of God is near" (Mark 1:15). It spread as first Jesus (Matthew 5:1) and later the apostles (Acts 28:31) taught people how to enter the Kingdom and live as its citizens. So, the Kingdom is present now in the lives of those who have trusted in Christ (Luke 7:21). Our aim is to live as its citizens bringing its values in whatever aspect of this world we have influence. Despite this, the Kingdom has not yet been revealed in its fullness. There is a day coming when the Kingdom will fill the earth as the Old Testament promised (e.g. Daniel 2:35, 44), but this depends upon the personal return of Christ in power.

In the past few decades there has been a movement, largely among Charismatic believers, that claims that the church will grow stronger and more influential in the world until it effectively establishes

God's Kingdom on earth either through the systems of human government or through a widespread influence in society. Only then will Christ return to take up His place as the head of that government. This view may be called *Postmillennialism* because they believe that Christ will return after the Millennial Kingdom has been ushered in. This concept does not fit with *The Parable of the Weeds*, where Christ is clear that the Kingdom will only be separated out from unbelieving human society in the final judgement. If the *postmillennial* view was correct, the wheat would have choked out the weeds so that only wheat was left at the time of harvest. Interestingly, *postmillennial* views can be seen in a number of Christian choruses, especially some written and popularised in the 1980s (for example Dave Bilborough's *An Army of Ordinary People*). We cannot discuss the merits of the alternative views about the Millennial reign of Christ (the term comes from the 1000 year period spoken of in Revelation 20), which divide into *Premillennialism* (the view that there will be a literal 1000 year Kingdom on this earth but that Christ will return in person first) and *Amillennialism* (the view that the 1000 year period is only figurative and represents the whole Church period from the ascension of Christ until His return in person).

Judgement Day is coming

Although during this age the world will continue to be a battle place between two kingdoms, there is a day coming when God will judge. Often people ask the question, why does God allow so much suffering? We must be pastorally sensitive and supportive to those who are suffering, but this parable also helps us to understand the Scriptural answer to the question. Only when God's Kingdom is revealed in its fullness will there be no more sin, suffering or death, but God must wait for the right time to bring judgement so that His Kingdom will be complete. The wheat in the story had to bring forth its harvest before the time was right to send in the harvesters. In fact it was by the fruit it bore that the harvesters could identify which plants were weeds and which were wheat (presuming that the weeds were a plant whose leaves were similar to the wheat). God has appointed the day when Christ will return, and it is the perfect time. In the meantime, Peter tells us that He is being patient towards us, allowing time for people to turn to Him in repentance and so be saved (II Peter 3:9). Although this world can be a painful place to live, God will not allow it to continue for ever. The day is coming when He will see that everything evil and that causes sin will be weeded out of His world so that He can return it to the perfect state He originally intended. Now is the day of grace when God's Kingdom continues to grow and develop, and we would do well to be sure that we are part of it.

Jesus was frank and honest in speaking about the reality of judgement and Hell, and this is something we often fail to be. We don't want to offend people and we find it hard to balance the love of God we have discovered with the fact that He must judge sin. The fact is that if there is no judgement there can be no Heaven. God must punish those who die unrepentant otherwise the world will always continue to be full of suffering and injustice. In the explanation of this parable Jesus speaks of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" for those who are cast outside the Kingdom. This is a common phrase in Matthew's record of Jesus' words (also found in Matthew 8:12; 13:50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30), but it is in Luke that we understand its significance, which is the turmoil and regret of having missed out on the Kingdom while others are included (see Luke 13:28). The Biblical doctrine of Hell focuses at least as much on the pain of regret and bitterness of a choice to reject God as it does of God's judgement on unrighteousness. Hell is the choice of those who reject God and is best described as a place without the love and blessings of God. The fact is that this judgement is not motivated by a vindictive spirit towards those who are judged but a love for those who are saved and a desire to purify and preserve the Kingdom.

A modern-day equivalent?

The following story is an attempt at an up-dated version of the *Parable of the Weeds*. We could call it *The Parable of the Adware*:

The Kingdom of God is like a man whose laptop wasn't running as well as it was supposed to because it had been infiltrated by Adware, software that used up processor power, created annoying (and some times rather offensive) pop-ups while he was browsing the internet and interfered with the running of some important programs. His friends told him about a brilliant new software called *Judgement Day* that would wipe out Adware from his system once and for all, but the problem was that he was working on a crucial, make-or-break project for his father's company, and he knew that the software would not only wipe out the Adware but some (if not all) of the files that were vital to the project. In fact, he even suspected that a rival of his father had designed the Adware to look similar to the files he was working on. He wasn't prepared to risk the future of the family business for the sake of getting rid of the inconvenience. He knew that one day he would complete the project and then he could save the results to cd and set *Judgement Day* loose to cleanse his laptop. In the meantime he would put up with a few pop-ups and slower running speed, but nothing would compromise his ultimate goal.

The Parable of the Growing Seed

Mark 4:26-29

In Mark's Gospel this is the second of three parables in Chapter 4, all of which include seed. These three are all lessons for the disciples in Kingdom ministry, and indeed it has been suggested that Mark's Gospel is at least partly intended as a manual for Christian discipleship. Jesus is preparing His disciples for the nature of the growth of the Kingdom.

The story

The story tells of a man who scattered seed on the ground but then focuses on the seed as the man goes about his daily life, sleeping and waking. Meanwhile the seed sprouts and grows. The mechanism by which this happens is a mystery to the man (he didn't have a degree in plant biology!). The soil produces the corn by stages "all by itself", without any need for the man to intervene. He simply sows and then, when the crop is ready, harvests.

The point

This simple parable has a clear point – the emphasis is on the fact that the growth of the crop is outside the farmer's control. It is a mystery to him (v27) and happened "all by itself" (v28). There is a clear application to Kingdom ministry. The responsibility of the evangelist is to preach the good news and to harvest the crop (we could describe this as following up those who are converted), but the growth is entirely God's work. It is the operation of the Spirit that brings spiritual growth, and this process begins unseen and then gradually becomes visible. Those who have had experience in evangelism and discipleship of others will be familiar with this principle. Often there is no initial evidence of an impact of God's word in the lives of people. In fact, they may initially appear hostile. Unseen, however, the Spirit is causing the seed of the word to germinate in their hearts. After a period it breaks above the surface and the growth becomes visible. Eventually it produces a crop. The same principle is explained by Paul in I Corinthians 3:6 where he says that one person plants the seed, another one waters it, but it is only God who makes things grow. This means that only God deserves credit and praise when a person comes to faith, but is also encouraging for the evangelist, as they know not to judge results by what is seen but to trust that the Holy Spirit is working in the lives of people. We must never fall into the trap of believing that what is seen is all there is.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19

This short parable occurs in all three synoptic Gospels with minor differences. In Matthew and Luke the seed grows into a tree, while Mark calls it a plant (literally a garden shrub). Mark also differs from the other two writers in that he describes the birds perching in the shade of the plant rather than specifically in its branches. These differences are minor details that don't actually conflict (a shrub is a small tree and the shade can still be in the branches) and don't change the meaning of the parable.

The story

Jesus spoke of the mustard seed, which is very small (there were existing proverbs about the smallness of mustard seeds), but after it is planted grows to become a large plant (apparently up to around three metres tall) with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in them (or in their shade in Mark's version).

The point

This is another parable about the growth of the Kingdom. The point is that the Kingdom starts out very small, just like the mustard seed, but that it will grow to become large and impressive. The disciples, as ministers of the Kingdom, should not be discouraged if it seems small and insignificant compared with the Jewish administration or the mighty Roman Empire. As the proverb says, mighty oaks from little acorns grow.

Some commentators see an additional significance in the fact that Jesus speaks about the birds perching in the branches. They point back to Old Testament passages in Ezekiel 17:23 and Daniel 4:12, 20-22 that speak of the birds perching in trees which may well be representative of the Gentiles. If they are correct in making this connection (which may well have been clear to some of Jesus' initial hearers who were well versed in the Old Testament) then Jesus is foretelling the inclusion of Gentiles in the Kingdom of God. On the other hand this mention of perching birds may be simply a detail to emphasise the size and significance of the plant that grew from such a tiny seed.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:3-7

This parable is found both in Luke, where it is the first in a trilogy of stories about things that were lost and found, and Matthew. In fact, these would appear to be two different occasions when Jesus told essentially the same story to emphasise the same key truth in response to two different sets of circumstances.

The story

The story is of a man who owns 100 sheep. One of them wanders away (Matthew) and becomes lost to him (Luke). He leaves the remaining ninety-nine in the open country (Luke) on the hills (Matthew) and goes looking for the one that is lost. Matthew says that this one sheep, if the owner finds it, will bring him more joy than the other 99 that did not wander off, while Luke adds the details of the owner joyfully lifting the sheep onto his shoulders and carrying it home where he calls his neighbours to come together to celebrate.

The point

The image of a shepherd (although the owner of the sheep is not explicitly called by this name in the story) was a familiar one in Jewish society. It was also a powerful image of God in the Old Testament Scriptures and of His care for His people (His sheep). This image is found with Messianic overtones in Isaiah 40:11, Ezekiel 34 and Micah 5:4. The Psalms also take up this theme in Psalm 100:3, 28:9, 80:1 and most famously of all in Psalm 23. It is likely that the Jewish hearers of Jesus' story would have made this connection to the Old Testament naturally, and indeed in the story the owner of the sheep does relate to God, or to Christ Himself. In both cases where this story is recorded there is a common theme that reveals the point of the parable: **individuals matter to God**. We know that He is not merely concerned with the group of people who will be His but with the individuals who make up that group. God is not prepared to simply "cut his losses" when it comes to human beings, but His love for them means that He will make every effort to rescue and to keep them. Although the basic point of the story is the same, the application is different between the two Gospels that include it.

Understanding the Parable: conclusion and context

In the two accounts that record this story Jesus concludes with different statements. This is because of the two different contexts in which the story is set. In Matthew the story is told to the disciples, but in Luke it is to the Pharisees and teachers of the law. There is no reason to believe that Matthew and Luke invented these contexts and fitted the story into it, but is entirely probable that Jesus could tell the same story twice in response to different circumstances. These two occurrences of the same story illustrate for us how the context helps us to understand the point of the parable.

Matthew's context: Jesus' little ones

Matthew records Jesus' conclusion as: "In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost". This is firmly rooted in the context of an extended discussion about the Kingdom of Heaven (remember that parables always have a lesson about God's Kingdom) that comes in response to the disciples' question: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:1). Jesus uses a little child as an "object lesson" and speaks first about entering the kingdom through changing and becoming like a little child (v3). He then adds that the greatest in the kingdom is the one who humbles himself like a little child. Entrance to and greatness in the Kingdom of God is by the same means: repentance and humble, child-like faith in God. Jesus then continues to emphasise the importance of the least, most seemingly insignificant person in the Kingdom. He teaches that His people should welcome those who seem unimportant, because by doing so they welcome Him (v5) and then warns about the seriousness of causing one of His little ones to sin (v6), adding that we must take firm action to avoid those things that cause us to sin (vv7-9). Then he tells us not to look down on His little ones because their angels are constantly before the Father in heaven (v10). This parable then follows. In this context and given the concluding statement it is clearly intended to emphasise the value of the little ones. They matter to God as individuals, and even though they may seem unimportant to others,

God is not willing that any of them should be lost. In this context the parable emphasises God's love for those who are His and challenges the disciples as ministers of the Kingdom to care for the sheep in the same way that God cares for them. The story in Matthew, then, has parallels to Christ's allegory in John 10 of the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd cares for the sheep and lays down His life for them (John 10:11). Those who enter through the gate which is the Shepherd will be saved and will be kept as they will go in and out and find pasture (John 10:9). However, the application in the context where Jesus has been teaching the disciples about the impact of others on His "little ones" is also for them to consider how they will care for Christ's flock. There is a lesson here for these disciples who will become the leaders of the church: every sheep is precious and every effort must be taken to bring that sheep back if they wander away from the flock. God takes joy in His sheep and so should those who claim to be great in His Kingdom. Jesus is the great Chief Shepherd (Hebrews 13:20) and those who serve as under-shepherds must care for and protect the flock as they lead His sheep to the food of His word (Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:2-4). In Matthew, then, the application of the story is primarily **pastoral**.

Luke's context: welcoming sinners!

Luke's trilogy of "lost and found" stories occurs in a context where the Pharisees and teachers of the law are muttering about the fact that Jesus welcomed sinners and even ate with them. This offended these people who had high respect for the law because they believed that these sinful people (described in Luke 15:1 as "tax collectors and 'sinners'") were under God's condemnation and that to associate with them would contaminate the person with their sin. In response Jesus tells three stories beginning with *The Parable of the Lost Sheep*. Luke records Jesus conclusion to the story in this context as: "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:7). In this context the parable emphasises the love of Christ for those who are lost and challenges His disciples to consider the value to God of those who are lost in sin. Christ loved them enough to come into the world and seek and save them, ultimately through His death for them. We must not miss the point of the fact that the rejoicing is greater over the repentant sinner than over the ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent (v7). This is the shocking point for the Pharisees who could not have conceived that God's love for sinners may be so great. Sadly they did indeed need to repent of that most blinding of sins – pride and the self-righteousness it engenders – but they could not accept it. In Luke, then, the application of the story is primarily **evangelistic**.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

Luke 15:8-10

This short parable is the second in Luke's trilogy of "lost and found" stories and is found only in Luke.

The story

The story is of a woman who has ten coins (drachmas – each one worth around a day's wage). These may well form a special headdress that was a sign of a married woman, although Jesus does not specifically say this. It may alternatively have represented the family savings. In any case, the emphasis is on the fact that the woman has lost one of the coins and mounts a search operation. This included lighting a lamp and sweeping to floor. She diligently looks for the coin and when she finds it she calls her neighbours and friends to celebrate with her.

The point

This story is set in the same context as *The Parable of the Lost Sheep*, and has the same emphasis. In both something was lost and someone searched to find it. Jesus explains the significance by a similar conclusion in v10 as he used at the end of the first parable in v7: "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents". This story clearly illustrates the fact that parables are not simply allegories. There is really very little correlation between a lost coin, which is an inanimate object that bears no responsibility for the fact that it is lost, and a lost sinner, which is a living person who has responsibility for his or her sin. Likewise, the act of the woman finding the coin bears little similarity to repentance. The emphasis is on the woman's rejoicing, which parallels the rejoicing of God and His angels when a sinner repents. The story is a picture of joy that draws the hearers in and connects to their lives. We should connect into the story either with a sense of joy as we realise that we were lost but are now found or (as the Pharisees would have) with a sense of indignation that God could possibly rejoice at a sinner repenting.

The Parable of the Lost Son

Luke 15:11-32

This parable is the third and last in Luke's trilogy of "lost and found" stories. It is one of the most famous stories Jesus ever told (probably ranking alongside *The Parable of the Good Samaritan* from Luke 10) and has even been described as one of the finest short stories ever written.

The story

The story is of a man who has two sons. The younger of the two comes to him and demands his share of the inheritance, which would have amounted to one third of the father's possessions since the eldest son was entitled to a double portion (Deuteronomy 21:17). It was not unknown for the inheritance to be given to the children while their father remained alive if he decided to retire from managing the family's affairs, but the directness with which the son asks seems to imply disrespect. It is as if the son is saying: "I wish you were already dead". This lack of filial piety should shock us, but it was certainly deeply shocking in the Jewish culture. This son is clearly analogous to the "sinners", who counted God's inheritance (their position within the covenant community of Israel) as a worthless thing to be squandered. The son goes to a distant land and after he had squandered everything in "wild living" he ended up in the lowest of conditions – feeding pigs (a despicable job for a Jew) and even longing to eat their food himself if he could only have the chance. In this low point the son "came his senses". He literally repented as he remembered his father's home and how even the hired men in his father's house, who had the lowest position within the household, has plenty to eat. He resolved to return home, but did not expect to be accepted again as a son. The most he could hope for was that his father would hear his confession of unworthiness and sorrow for his sin (which was against God and His father – this is true repentance) and bring him in like a hired man. However, as the son approached the house, his father saw him at a distance (clearly the father had been waiting and watching for his return) and was "filled with compassion for him". He did a most improper thing for a man of age and status – he ran in public to meet his son and threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son began the confession he had planned, but before he could reach his suggestion about becoming a hired man the father had interrupted him. Instead of criticism or judgement the father spoke words that indicated restoration and acceptance. He would have the best robe, a ring of status and sandals (slaves were barefooted but free men wore sandals). The fattened calf, prepared for a special occasion, would be slaughtered and there would be a feast. The son who was dead was alive – he had been lost but now was found.

Then, in v25 we have probably the greatest contrast in the story. The older son had not been present at the beginning of the celebrations. When he heard the music he asked the reason, and when he was told that his brother had returned he was angry and refused to go in (v28). The father showed the same compassion for him that he had shown for the younger son by coming out to see him. He even demeaned himself by pleading with him to come in and join the celebrations. But the son was indignant. His response indicates his real attitude. His years of service for the father had not been motivated by love, but had been "slaving". His obedience had been begrudged. He had only done these things to earn his own reward. He could not even come to call his brother his brother, but scornfully calls him "this son of yours" (vv30). He casts aspersions on his brother, mentioning prostitutes for the first time in the story, and on his father, almost mocking him. The story ends with the father's words as he tries to explain to his resentful son that this celebration was their duty because of the bond of love for the brother. Had the father not treated the older son well? Wasn't he always with the father?

The sequence of three

We must pause for a minute before focusing on the point of this parable to consider how the three parables of "lost and found" fit together as a sequence. Clearly the common theme is that in each there is a movement from lost to found and then the consequence of rejoicing and celebration. In the first two Jesus specifically connects this to the idea of rejoicing in Heaven when a person repents, but in the third this is implicit. The third story has the added dimension of the contrast with the older brother who feels hard done by and resentful. So, these three stories all illustrate a common point, but is there any significance beyond this in the choice of subjects of the stories or even the fact that there are three stories in the first place. We certainly can notice that there is a progression within the stories in terms of the relative values of what had been lost. In the first story it is 1% of the man's livelihood (one sheep of

one hundred). In the second it has risen to 10% (one coin in ten), and there may also be an added sentimental value if the coins were indeed part of the headdress that indicated the woman's married status. By the third story, however, the percentage is 50% (one son in two), but what was lost is also the thing of greatest value – a son and heir. Undoubtedly there is a sense of crescendo in these stories, as the hearer is drawn deeper in the stakes are raised. By the third story they have got the gist of it and the point is clear, but then Jesus drops the bombshell that is the ultimate point of all the stories by his contrast with the attitude of the older son. This point will be discussed below.

Other writers insist on trying to see further significance in the details of the story. For example, they draw out principles of three different ways the subjects of the story became lost (the sheep wandered, the coin was simply lost, the son rebelled), linking these to three different kinds of sin. This is unwarranted in the text itself and is actually quite dangerous as it could lead to wrong conclusions about the nature of sin and salvation. These parables are not meant as allegories explaining the nature of salvation, they are simply intended to emphasise the possibility of repentance and the rejoicing of heaven as a result and to rebuke the Pharisees for their self-righteousness. None of the stories contains a complete picture of repentance and of God's initiative in salvation. If we read only the first two we would conclude that salvation is entirely God's work and is not dependent on the response of the lost person, whilst the third story alone may leave us believing that repentance is entirely the decision of man and that God can forgive and restore simply on the basis of repentance with no need to do anything on His own account. Most importantly of all, none of the stories contain reference to the cross *per se*, although *The Lost Sheep* comes closest as the man risks danger to rescue the sheep. We must not aim to reconstruct a theology of salvation based on these parables alone.

One other suggestion about the sequence of three that I find quite appealing but which may well also be reading too much into the order is to link each story with a different person of the trinity. In this suggestion the owner of the sheep (often people describe him as a shepherd, although Jesus doesn't use this word of him) represents Christ, the Good Shepherd who seeks and saves what was lost (Luke 19:10) and the father in the third story represents the Father, who stayed at home but rejoiced when the repentant son returned. These references are relatively obvious, but if the Son is in the first story and the Father in the last, then can we see the Spirit in the second? Some have suggested that the lamp lit by the woman does represent the Spirit, who shines the light of God's truth into the sinner's heart. Although this explanation for the presence of a trinity of stories is appealing, I suspect that it goes beyond the intentions of Christ and Luke, and that the sequence is simply intended to create the crescendo effect I mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, I mention it as a point for consideration. Perhaps we will have to wait until glory to ask if it was actually intended in the text.

The point

Now we come to the point of this most famous of parables and the pinnacle of the three stories. Amazingly, some commentaries on this passage and many sermons on it miss the final point altogether. They focus so intently on the "prodigal son" who was lost and found and the wonderful picture of God's compassion for the lost and the acceptance of the repentant sinner that he presents, that they miss the fact that Jesus' story continues for another eight verses after the "Meantime" of v25. It is true that the prodigal is a powerful representation of our position – we were lost and are found, dead but now alive. God in His mercy pardoned us and bestowed upon us a position of privilege that we had both squandered because of sin and despised because of our pride in ourselves. It is as the prodigal that we most readily enter into the story. However, we must remember who Jesus told these stories to. It was not to the tax collectors and sinners, but to their detractors, the Pharisees and teachers of the law (v3 specifically tells us that it was to them that He told the stories). These hearers were not intended to connect with the story as the prodigal but as the elder son.

In the first two stories Jesus has prepared the way. The hearers, if they took time to listen at all, would understand that the stories illustrate rejoicing over finding the thing that was lost. They could easily identify with the man who owned the sheep or even with the woman and her coin s these were everyday events. They would be shocked by the idea that God could be more joyous over the repentant sinner than over the sheep and coins that were never lost, but at least they could identify themselves as these things that were safe and secure in the possession of the master. They were faithful to God. And so it is at first with the third story. They would easily slip into sympathy with the elder son. He was not disrespectful and did not take his inheritance lightly. They too were pious and faithful, committed to the Law of God. As the story progresses and the prodigal returns home they would feel the same sense of

injustice that the first two stories created – it was hardly fair, and the son certainly didn't deserve the highest honour that his father accords him. As the elder son returns to the house and realises what has happened they can sympathise with his indignation. Surely it is righteous indeed! What happens next, however, is shocking indeed. It is the elder son who ends up outside the celebrations. There was plenty to share, but he would not come inside. His own sense of bitterness at the blessings given to others who didn't deserve them has disqualified him from the prize and recognition he thought was his by right. It is not for want of his father trying – he even pleads with him to reconsider – but the fact is that this son has chosen to reject his own position in the family because of his resentment of his brother.

What a powerful picture of the Pharisees! In 14:15-24 Jesus had already indicated that the feast in the Kingdom of God would have a very different guest list than the Pharisees expected. As Jesus ate in a Pharisee's house he told a story of people who rejected their invitation to a banquet because of various excuses and how the poor and outcasts ended up invited to take their places. The point of this parable is similar. The Pharisees who had been so confident in themselves and their acceptance with God and so sure in their condemnation of others would actually find themselves excluded from the Kingdom because of their own pride and bitterness. And what of us? Could we possibly harbour a similar attitude to these Pharisees? Could it be that we too have a sense of our own importance and acceptability to God? Are we not also prone to the temptation to compare with others and find ourselves favourable? Could it be that we have lost the joy of serving God because we resent the fact that we seem to work harder and longer than others? Have we discovered the unconditional love of God that is not impressed with our piety but simply rejoices in our presence?

Of course, as we read this story and this sequence of stories, we will enter into them at the point of our need. That is part of the purpose of parables – to produce a different response depending on what we need to hear:

- You may see yourself in the prodigal before his repentance, lost in sin and the consequences of your own rebellion. The parable (or rather the Spirit through it) may call you to repent and return to the Father who loves you.
- You may identify with the prodigal after his return, full of joy at God's amazing grace and mercy towards you. The parable may affirm you in your position of acceptance as God's child.
- You may, like the first hearers, identify with the older son, resentful and feeling hard done by and neglected, angry with God because you have been faithful and yet others seem to get all the recognition, or confident that God will accept you because of your works for Him. Your service for God has become joyless and dreary. The parable may call you to repent of your own self-righteousness and to come inside the party, to learn to celebrate what God is doing in the lives of others, even those who seemed irredeemable and undeserving.

Of course, in reality many of the first hearers would have missed the point completely, or have been driven deeper into their sense of self-righteousness, and so may we. May we have ears to hear!

The Parable of the Faithful & Wise Servant

Matthew 24:45-51; Luke 12:42-48

This parable occurs in both Matthew and Luke. In Matthew it forms one of a series of parables concerning the return of Christ together with *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* and *The Parable of the Talents*. This trilogy comes after Jesus' statement that His return will be unexpected and that His followers must therefore be constantly ready, and is followed by the account of the final judgement where Jesus speaks about the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46). Although this is sometimes called a parable, Jesus does not refer to it as such, and it seems rather to be a true account of the final judgement using sheep and goats as a simile. The significance of the sequence will be discussed below under the discussion of *The Parable of the Talents*. Luke gives a more detailed context to the parable. It comes in response to a question from Peter about to whom a preceding short parable is addressed. That parable is about the owner of a house who is unaware of the time when a thief will come to break in and is therefore unprepared. Peter asks the Lord whether this parable is intended for everyone or only for the disciples. Rather than giving a direct answer to Peter's question the Lord gives this parable.

The story

This story is remarkably similar in Matthew and Luke's accounts, with the exception that Luke adds a slightly longer postscript. The story is of a servant who, during a period when the master is away, has been put in charge of his master's servants with the particular responsibility of ensuring that the master's property is used to provide them with their needs. The servant is either faithful in this responsibility, in which case the master will give him greater responsibilities when he returns, or, if he is wicked, he will abuse this position by mistreating his fellow servants and squandering the master's property on his own pleasure. The justification in the servants mind in this case is that his master has been away for so long, and presumably he has begun to suspect that he will not return or decided that he can enjoy himself for a while and then decide to put things right before the master returns. The master, however, returns when the servant is not expecting him and will execute judgement on the unfaithful servant but cutting him to pieces and putting him in the place of judgement with the hypocrites (Matthew) or unbelievers (Luke) where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew). Luke then adds a statement about degrees of reward and punishment. Those who know the master's will and disobey will receive many blows, whereas those who sin in ignorance will receive few blows. The principle is summarised in the statement: "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked".

The point

In the context in both Matthew and Luke this is clearly a parable about watchfulness in light of the promised return of Christ. A good servant who has been appointed as steward of his master's possessions in his absence will never forget that he is not the owner. He will always be aware that his position is merely temporary and that he has been given responsibility for a purpose and must one day answer to his master. Likewise, we have been entrusted by God as stewards of His possessions until Christ comes again. The good servant will be faithful in this task and so will be rewarded, but the wicked servant will seize the opportunity to indulge himself and mistreat his fellow servants. The primary lesson here is for those who are leaders among God's people (presumably the answer to Peter's question in Luke is that it is intended first and foremost for the disciples). The good leader will function as an under-shepherd of Christ, feeding and protecting the flock, but a bad servant will feed himself on the flock. Interestingly, the responsibility he is given simply proves the true character of the servant. The bad servant is already wicked before his master leaves, but this situation provides the opportunity for his true nature to show itself. Therefore we cannot use this parable to teach that we can be saved and lost since we can just as easily say that the unfaithful servant was never saved to begin with. Besides this, we must remember that parables have often one main point. What, then, is the point of this parable? Simply this: we must remain watchful as faithful servants of God and not use our time in this life to indulge ourselves at the expense of others. Such behaviour is unfitting for God's servant, and in fact those who act in this way deserve a place with the hypocrites, for that is what they are.

Luke's additional comments about degrees of punishment are interesting and certainly seem to apply to the final judgement where people will be judged by whatever revelation of God they had received. Those who knew more and had more opportunity to believe will be judged more severely.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

Matthew 25:1-13

This is the second of three parables in Matthew 24 and 25 that illustrate the return of Christ and its implications. The context of the three will be discussed below after we have considered the third parable. This parable is unique to Matthew.

The story

The story is set in a Jewish wedding where ten virgins are waiting to escort the bridegroom into the wedding feast, probably at the house of the bride although she is not mentioned in the story. Their function was similar to modern day bridesmaids, although it is the groom that they accompany. Five of the virgins were foolish and ill-prepared. They had lamps with them, knowing that it might be night-time before the bridegroom came, but they did not bring any spare oil. It seems that they didn't expect to wait as long as they had to. The other five were wise, and they brought spare oil to refill their lamps. When the cry went out at midnight to say that the bridegroom was coming there was a great commotion as the virgins tried to prepare their lamps. The five foolish virgins realised that their lamps were about to go out and asked to borrow some oil from the others, but the wise virgins explained that this was impossible as there was not enough oil to spare and sent them to buy their own oil. While they were away buying some (we can imagine them making a trip to their local 24 hour supermarket), the bridegroom arrived. The five wise virgins who were ready went indoors with him and the door was shut, leaving the five foolish virgins outside. When they tried in desperation (repeating "Sir, Sir!") to gain entry the bridegroom denied any knowledge of them.

The point

This parable illustrates the dangers of reading parables as allegories. We must avoid questions like the significance of the number ten or what the oil and lamps represent (well meaning but unfounded suggestions that the oil speaks of the Holy Spirit, of grace or even of good deeds) or the significance of the fact that the virgins fell asleep (both wise and foolish virgins slept, indicating that this is not important to the story) and focus on the underlying message of the story. We must even be careful not to place too much emphasis on the fact that this is a bridegroom and that Jesus speaks of Himself as a bridegroom (Luke 5:34; John 3:29). Whilst it is clear that the coming of the bridegroom parallels the return of Christ, there is no mention of the bride in the story, and the church is the bride of Christ whereas the focus in this story is on the virgins.

The oil, lamps and sleep are simply descriptive details, but the punch line of the story is that five of the virgins were not properly prepared. They had the same opportunity as the other five but end up outside the feast simply because they were not prepared. The point of the parable is simply this: in light of the promised return of Christ we must be ready. Only those who are ready will be included in the feast. Those who are not ready will be shut outside. Just as in the story, readiness is not transferable (no one will get to Heaven by holding on to the feet of a Christian!); it depends on the choices we have made before-hand.

A modern-day equivalent? – The Parable of the Text Competition

News had spread far and wide among Northern Ireland's Christian community that Chris Tomlin, Matt Redman, Brian Doerksen, Paul Baloche and Robin Mark were planning a united concert in the Odyssey Arena. What was even better was that it was going to be absolutely free! Unfortunately, spaces were limited and the Odyssey insisted that there had to be some kind of competition to allocate seats. The organisers came up with a simple plan. People could queue up outside and all they had to do was to wait until Matt Redman arrived (he would come to the Arena on the day before the concert), and when they saw what colour of shirt he was wearing they could text it to 888880. The first 5000 people who texted in would get free entry. The BCCC youth group turned out in force and surprisingly early. They were the first in line (in fact they camped outside the area the night before the concert). Bored as they were they put in their time by phoning their friends and family. Then, when the day came Matt's flight from England was delayed. He didn't arrive until midnight. Phil was the first to see him, and he shouted out: "He's here! Matt Redman's here, and his shirt is yellow!" A frantic sense of excitement spread

through the assembled crowd as everyone grabbed their mobile phones to text in the answer. Mixed with the excited voices, however, was the faint sound of groaning. Half of the BCCC youth (no names mentioned) had discovered that after a night of chatting and texting they had no credit left in their phones. In desperation they turned to their friends who had saved enough credit for this vital text. "Can I use your credit?", they asked, but the others couldn't help. Most of them only had enough credit for their own text, and anyway the rules had been really clear: it was one text per mobile number only. Then Phil came up with a plan. "Get yourselves over to the 24 hour Tesco at Knocknagoney quickly. Buy some credit and text as quickly as you can!" The group set off as quickly as the speed limit would allow them. They got down to Tesco really quickly and bought their credit. They texted the number with the word "yellow" and they waited for a reply. Sadly, when the reply came it was short and sweet: "Sorry, you're too late".

The Parable of the Talents

Matthew 25:14-30

This is the longest and last of three parables in this section of Matthew that illustrate the return of Christ. Although it bears many similarities to *The Parable of the Ten Minas* in Luke 19:11-27, the context and application of that parable are different and so they are best considered as separate parables.

The story

In this story we see another master who is going on a journey. He leaves not one servant but three in charge of his property. Each one is given a different amount of money depending on his ability: five talents, two talents and one talent. The men with five and two talents both invest their money and double their amount. The third man, who was given one talent, however, simply buries the money in a hole in the ground. After a long period away the master returns and settles accounts with them. He describes the first two servants who had invested the money as "good and faithful servant", promises to put them in charge of many things, and invites them to share in his happiness. When the third servant comes he tries to justify his lack of profit by speaking of his master's hardness and ruthlessness. He says that it was out of fear that he hid the talent, presumably because he thought it was best to at least protect what had been given to him rather than risk losing it. The master's response is in keeping with his character as described by the servant. He calls him "wicked" and "lazy" and says he should at least have invested the money with a banker so that he would have interest to show. He pronounces judgement saying that the one talent should be removed from him and given to the man who had ten talents, and that the servant should be thrown outside into the darkness "where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth".

The point

Again this parable must not be read as a simple allegory. In particular that approach would be deficient in terms of the description of the master's character (the servant describes him in v24 and the master accepts the description in v26), which could hardly be seen to refer to God (God cannot harvest where He has not sown as He is the rightful owner of all things). It is also unhelpful to limit the talents to refer to one specific aspect of the Christian life (suggestions have included spiritual gifts, the law, natural abilities and the gospel). A talent was a huge amount of money (probably equivalent to 20 years' earnings for a laborer) and the significance of the talents in this story is simply to illustrate the principle of stewardship. The emphasis is, however, clearly on the return of Christ and there is significance in the fact that the master was a way for a "long time". The point of the parable seems to be simply this: in light of Christ's promised return we should use whatever resources God has given us for His Kingdom. We must not be guilty of either of the two traits that the master ascribed to his servant: wickedness and laziness. God has entrusted us with different abilities and resources (financial or otherwise), and we are simply stewards of His Kingdom until Christ returns in glory. Just as in the parable it seems true in everyday life that some people seem to have been entrusted with more resources than others (although even the poorest has been blessed with huge resources), but the key question is not how much we have what we do with what has been given to us. We do well to remember that we are merely stewards of all we have and that the rightful owner is God Himself. We should live to invest whatever we have wisely and make it profitable in God's Kingdom.

It is also important to note that the faithful servants do not appear to be rewarded with an amount of money for them to possess but that their reward is further responsibility as stewards. Because they have been "faithful with a few things" they will be put in charge of "many things" (vv21 and 23). Their reward is to share in the master's happiness as they continue to serve in his household. Sometimes people speak of rewards in Heaven as if we are storing up our own possessions, but Christ speaks of the reward of sharing in the presence of the Father and continuing to serve Him in greater ways than we can currently imagine. The reward of the servant of God who is faithful in this age is to continue as a faithful servant eternally in the age to come when the Kingdom is revealed in its fullness.

The three parables in context

Matthew 24-25 is often referred to as the Olivet Discourse of Christ since it was delivered privately to the disciples as Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives (24:3). The structure of the discourse is as follows:

1. Jesus predicts His return in power and glory (24:1-35)

In this extended passage of teaching Jesus explains that there will be persecution for His followers, false prophets who will claim to be Him, and signs preceding His return, but that when He comes it will be unmistakable as He will appear in great power for all to see (vv30-31).

2. The time of His return is unknown so we must be ready (24:36-25:30)

Having spoken of His return in glory, Jesus now explained to the disciples that no one knows the day when He will return (24:36). People have often been troubled by the fact that Jesus confesses that even He (the Son) does not know the day or hour. Assuming that the phrase "nor the Son" is in Matthew's original, is this a confession from Christ's own lips that He is less than fully divine? It should not be read in this way, but it must be understood in the context of Christ's incarnation and the wilful limiting of His own power, glory and even knowledge. His incarnate life was one of perfect humanity, and that entailed dependence on His Father. It emphasises the fact that Christ was fully man, and this does not in any way weaken Scripture's consistent teaching that Christ is also fully God.

The following section from 24:37 to 25:30, which includes the three parables we have considered, is an extended discussion of the fact of the nature of Christ's return as a sudden and unpredictable event for which we must therefore be in constant readiness. Christ illustrates the suddenness and unexpectedness of His return with two illustrations:

- a) **By comparison with the Flood (24:37-42)** – while Noah was busy preparing his boat the people were too busy partying to realise that the Flood was coming and so were taken by surprise. So it will be when Christ returns. Two men will be in the field and only one will be taken. Two women will be grinding grain together and only one will be taken. Although it is unclear whether those who are taken are taken for judgement or, perhaps more likely, because they belong to the elect (24:31), the point is clear: Christ's return will be sudden and many will be found unprepared. Christ summarises His point with the words, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day our Lord will come" (v42).
- b) **By comparison with a thief (24:43-44)** – this illustration could be considered a short parable (in fact the longer version recorded by Luke in 12:35-40 is referred to as such by Peter in 12:41) but since it is only one sentence I have not considered it as a separate parable in this study. Jesus simply makes comparison between a thief who comes during the night time without announcing the timing of his coming to the owner of the house, and His own return which will be equally unpredictable. Just as a home owner who is aware that a thief is planning to break into his house would be extra vigilant, so those who know that Christ will return should be alert. Jesus summarises His point with the words, "So you must also be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (24:44).

To further emphasise these truths, Jesus tells the three parables we have just considered. Although the emphasis may be slightly different in each parable, the basic lesson is clear: we do not know when Christ will return so we must be:

- Ready as faithful servants (the servant)
- Prepared and watchful (the virgins)
- Productive as stewards of whatever He has entrusted to us (the talents)

There is one additional common element in these three parables that may also provide a hint about the return of Christ. In the first the servant felt that the master was staying away for a long time (24:48). In the second the bridegroom's coming was delayed certainly longer than the foolish virgins had anticipated (25:5). In the third parable the master returned "after a long time" (25:19). There is surely a forewarning here of the long delay of Christ's return. Although the early Christians often expected Christ to return after a very short time, we should not be surprised at the passing of 2000 years. These parables show that there can be a delay but challenge us to be ready and waiting nonetheless. As Peter reminded the first century believers, "do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (II Peter 3:8-9).

3. When He comes in glory it will be to judge (25:31-46)

One question remains about these three parables. Do they suggest the idea that one can be saved and then lost depending on works? After all, the servants both started out in the same privileged

position but one ended up suffering the most severe judgement because of his actions(24:51). Likewise, the ten virgins all had the same position but five ended up outside the celebrations (25:12). The three servants were all entrusted with talents, but one ended up outside in darkness and regret (25:30). Are these pictures of believers who lose their salvation because of selfish living, careless lack of preparation or bad stewardship? For the answer to this question we must consider the next section in the discourse, where Jesus describes the nature of the judgement.

This section has been described as a parable, but Jesus does not frame it in these terms, and it appears to be a genuine description of the nature of the final judgement and the kinds of things that will be said on that day. Christ (the Son of Man) is the judge and the nations must stand before Him as He separates His own people out from among them. This judgement will be like a shepherd separating sheep from goats. In the Middle East a shepherd may have a mixed flock, and they may appear similar from a distance, but the trained eye can separate them. The sheep in this picture represent the faithful ones and the goats represent the wicked. It is vital to notice that the basis of this separation is the very nature of the animal. The people are separated out before there is any mention of their works on the basis of their very nature. Their works (or lack of them) are then mentioned as the evidence of their true nature. The true believer can be distinguished on the basis of how they live. It is impossible to be one of Christ's sheep and not to live a life of love and service for Him. The preceding parables have already prepared us for this idea. The righteous (v37) will be recognisable by their humility (they are surprised by Christ's words and do not even realise how they have served Him) and compassion, while the cursed (v41) will be revealed in their pride (they are surprised that they have been found guilty) and lovelessness. This is not a judgement on the basis of works, but one where works are presented as the evidence of true life-change or its absence. The only way to be saved is to be one of Christ's sheep, and this account in itself does not tell us how to become one, but we can be absolutely sure that the true believer in Christ will progress in true discipleship.

So, then, how does this understanding help us to explain the three parables? A true disciple will be a faithful servant, a wise virgin and a good steward. She will not use this life to indulge her own pleasures at the expense of others, putting off the idea of settling accounts with God. She will be prepared and will remain faithful to the end. She will use whatever resources God has entrusted to her for His Kingdom and glory.