



Scripture Study Course 2014 – Part 9

Daily Study – Readings and Meditations

Week 9

Reading and Interpreting the Parables of Jesus

Assignments: Meditation (20 minutes daily) and Reading for Study (40 minutes daily):

- Part 1: Treasures Uncovered
 - The Hidden Treasure and Pearl of Great Price: Matthew 13:44-46 – page 2
 - Study: Discovering the Treasures in Jesus' Parables and The Treasure and the Pearl, by Jeanne Kun [see separate PDF]
 - Study: Reading the Parables of Jesus, by Don Schwager - page 3
- Part 2: Three-Point Parables
 - The Lost Sheep and Lost Coin: Luke 15:4-10 – page 5-6
 - The Two Debtors: Luke 7:41-43 - page 7
 - The Prodigal Son: Luke 15:11-32 – pages 8-9
 - Study: Three-Point Parables by C. Blomberg – pages 12-16
- Part 3: Two-Point parables
 - The Pharisee and the Tax Collector: Luke 18:9-14 page 25
 - The Pharisee and the Tax Collector, by Jeanne Kun [separate PDF]
 - The Two Builders: Matthew 7:24-27 and Luke 6:47-49 page 26
 - Study: Two-Point Parables by C. Blomberg – pages 17-19
- Part 4: One-Point parables
 - The Tower Builder and the Warring King: Luke 14:28-32 – page – pages 10-11
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The Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price

Scripture: *Matthew 13:44-46*

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, 46 who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Meditation: In a peasant community the best safe was often the earth. The man in the parable "went in his joy" to sell everything. Why? Because he found a treasure worth possessing above all else he had. He did not, however, have enough to buy the treasure. Fortunately, he only needed enough to buy the field. In a similar fashion, God offers his kingdom as incomparable treasure at a price we can afford! We can't pay the full price for the life which God gives us; but when we exchange our life for the life which God offers, we receive a treasure beyond compare.

The pearl of great price also tells us a similar lesson. Pearls in the ancient world came to represent the supremely valuable. Jesus remarked that one should *not cast pearls before swine* (Matthew 7:6). Why would a merchant sell everything for a peerless pearl? No doubt because he was attracted to what he thought was the greatest treasure he could possess. Discovering God's kingdom is like stumbling across hidden treasure or finding the one pearl of great price. When we discover the kingdom of God we receive the greatest possible treasure -- the Lord himself. Selling all that we have to obtain this incomparable treasure could mean many things -- our friends, job, our "style of life", what we do with our free time. *Treasure* has a special connection to the *heart*, the place of desire and longing, the place of will and focus. The thing we most set our *heart* on is our highest treasure.

In this parable what does the *treasure of the kingdom* refer to? It certainly refers to the kingdom of God in all its aspects. But in a special way, the Lord himself is the treasure we seek for. *If the Almighty is your gold and your precious silver, then you will delight yourself in the Almighty* (Job 22:22-23). Is the Lord the treasure and delight of your heart?

"Lord Jesus, reveal to me the true riches of your kingdom. Help me to set my heart on you alone as the treasure beyond compare with any other. Free my heart of any inordinate desires or attachment to other things that I may freely give to you all that I have in joy and gratitude for all that you have given to me. May I always find joy and delight in your presence."

Reading the Parables of Jesus

“He began to teach them many things in parables” (Mark 4:2)

by Don Schwager

Communicating with images and stories

Like the rabbis of his time, Jesus used simple word-pictures, called parables, to help people understand who God is and what his kingdom or reign is like. Jesus used images and characters taken from everyday life to create a miniature play or drama to illustrate his message. This was Jesus most common way of teaching. His stories appealed to the young and old, poor and rich, and to the learned and unlearned as well. Over a third of the Gospels by Matthew, Mark, and Luke contain [parables](#) told by Jesus. Jesus loved to use illustrations to reach the heart of his listeners through their imagination. These word-pictures challenged the mind to discover anew what God is like and moved the heart to make a response to God's love and truth. Like a skillful artist, Jesus painted lively pictures with short and simple words. A good picture can speak more loudly and clearly than many words. Jesus used the ordinary everyday to point to another order of reality – hidden, yet visible to those who had “eyes to see” and “ears to hear”. Jesus communicated with pictures and stories, vivid illustrations which captured the imaginations of his audience more powerfully than an abstract presentation could. His parables are like buried treasure waiting to be discovered ([Matthew 13:44](#)).

How can ordinary everyday images and stories, such as hidden treasure, a tiny mustard seed, a determined woman looking for her lost coin, a barren fig tree, a pearl of great price, and some uninvited wedding guests, portray timeless and extraordinary truths? Jesus taught by use of comparisons. “To what shall we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use for it? It is like a mustard seed...” (Mark 4:30-31). God's kingdom or reign is like what happens in Jesus' stories. The comparisons have to do with a whole process, and not simply with an object or person alone. While his parables are rooted in a specific time and place, they nonetheless speak of timeless realities to people of every time and place. They underline the fact that God works in every age and he meets us in the ordinary everyday situations of life.

What is a parable?

A parable is a word-picture which uses an image or story to illustrate a truth or lesson. It creates a mini-drama in picture language that describes the reality being illustrated. It shows a likeness between the image of an illustration and the object being portrayed. It defines the unknown by using the known. It helps the listener to discover the deeper meaning and underlying truth of the reality being portrayed. It can be a figure of speech or comparison, such as “the kingdom of God ..is like a mustard seed ..or like yeast” (Luke 13:19, 21). More commonly it is a short story told to bring out a lesson or moral. Jesus used simple stories or images to convey important truths about God and his kingdom, and lessons pertaining to the way of life and happiness which God has for us. They commonly feature examples or illustrations from daily life in ancient Palestine, such as mustard seeds and fig trees, wineskins and oil lamps, money and treasure, stewards, workers, judges, and homemakers, wedding parties and children's games. Jesus' audience would

be very familiar with these illustrations from everyday life. Today we have to do some *homework* to understand the social customs described.

Jesus' parables have a double meaning. First, there is the literal meaning, apparent to anyone who has experience with the subject matter. But beyond the literal meaning lies a deeper meaning – a beneath-the-surface lesson about God's truth and his kingdom. For example, the parable of the leaven (see [Matthew 13:33](#)) describes the simple transformation of dough into bread by the inclusion of the yeast. In like manner, we are transformed by God's kingdom when we allow his word and Spirit to take root in our hearts. And in turn we are called to be leaven that transforms the society in which we live and work. Jerome, an early church father and biblical scholar remarked: “The marrow of a parable is different from the promise of its surface, and like as gold is sought for in the earth, the kernel in a nut and the hidden fruit in the prickly covering of chestnuts, so in parables we must search more deeply after the divine meaning.”

Jesus' parables often involve an element of surprise or an unexpected twist. We are taken off guard by the progression of the story. The parable moves from the very familiar and understandable aspects of experience to a sudden turn of events or a remarkable comparison which challenges the hearer and invites further reflection. For example, why should a shepherd go through a lot of bother and even risk his life to find [one lost sheep](#) when ninety-nine are in his safe keeping? The shepherd's concern for one lost sheep and his willingness to risk his own life for it tells us a lot about God's concern for his children who go astray.

How to read the parables

Jesus told his disciples that not everyone would understand his parables. “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not hear” (Luke 8:10). Did Jesus mean to say that he was deliberately confusing his listeners? Very likely not. Jesus was speaking from experience. He was aware that some who heard his parables refused to understand them. It was not that they could not intellectually understand them, but rather, their hearts were closed to what Jesus was saying. They had already made up their minds to not believe. God can only reveal the secrets of his kingdom to the humble and trusting person who acknowledges the need for God and for his truth. The parables of Jesus will enlighten us if we approach them with an open mind and heart, ready to let them challenge us. If we approach them with the conviction that we already know the answer, then we, too, may look but not see, listen but not hear or understand.

When reading the parables it is important to not get bogged down in the details of the story. The main point is what counts. Very often the details are clear enough, but some are obscure (for example, why would a rich man allow his dishonest steward to take care of his inventory; see [Luke 16:1-8](#)). A storyteller doesn't have to make every detail fit perfectly. Each parable will typically present a single point. Look for the main point and don't get bogged down in the details. In addition, Jesus often throws in a surprise or unexpected twist. These challenge the hearer and invite us to reflect. Jesus meant for his parables to provoke a response. If we listen with faith and humility then each will understand as he or she is able to receive what Jesus wishes to speak to each of our hearts.

The Lost Sheep

Scripture: Matthew 18:12-14 (see also [Luke 15:3-10](#))

12 What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go in search of the one that went astray? 13 And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. 14 So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

Meditation: Do you know what it's like to lose your bearings and to be hopelessly adrift in a sea of uncertainty? To be alone, lost, and disoriented without a sense of direction is one of the worst fears we can encounter. What we would give to have a guide who would show us the way to safety and security, the way to home and family. Scripture comforts us with the assurance that God will not rest until we find our way home to him. The scriptures use the image of a shepherd who cares for his sheep to describe what God is like. God promised that he would personally shepherd his people and lead them to safety (Isaiah 40:11). That is why God sent his only begotten son as the Messiah King who would not only restore peace and righteousness to the land, but who would also shepherd and care for his people with love and compassion. Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep (John 10:11).

What can we learn from the lesson of Jesus' parable about a lost sheep? This parable gives us a glimpse of the heart of a true shepherd, and the joy of a community reunited with its lost members. Shepherds not only had to watch over their sheep by day and by night; they also had to protect them from wolves and lions who preyed upon them, and from dangerous terrain and storms. Shepherds often had large flocks, sometimes numbering in the hundreds or thousands. It was common to inspect and count the sheep at the end of the day. You can imagine the surprise and grief of the shepherd who discovers that one of his sheep is missing! Does he wait until the next day to go looking for it? Or does he ask a neighboring shepherd if he might have seen the stray sheep? No, he goes immediately in search of this lost sheep. Delay for even one night could mean disaster leading to death. Sheep by nature are very social creatures. An isolated sheep can quickly become bewildered, disoriented, and even neurotic. Easy prey for wolves and lions!

The shepherd's grief and anxiety is turned to joy when he finds the lost sheep and restores it to the fold. The shepherd searches until what he has lost is found. His persistence pays off. What was new in Jesus' teaching was the insistence that sinners must be sought out time and time again. How easy to forget and be distracted with other matters while the lost become prey for devouring wolves of the soul. The Apostle Peter reminds us that the "devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). God does not rejoice in the loss of anyone, but desires that we be saved and restored to friendship with him. That is why the whole community of heaven rejoices when one sinner is found and restored to fellowship with God. God is on a rescue mission today to save us from the destructive forces of sin and evil. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, watches over every step we take. Do you listen to his voice and heed his wise counsel? Do you follow the path he has set for you - a path that leads to life rather than death?

"Lord Jesus, nothing escapes your watchful gaze and care. May I always walk in the light of your truth and never stray from your loving presence."

The Lost Sheep & the Lost Coin

Scripture: Luke 15:3-10 (see also [Matthew 18:12-14](#))

3 So he told them this parable: 4 "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? 5 And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.' 7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

8 "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? 9 And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.' 10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Meditation: The parable of the lost coin and the parable of the lost sheep can be linked with the parable of the lost son (see [The Prodigal Son](#)). While each story emphasizes something different from the other, all three depict a seeker in search of something or someone lost.

What can we learn from the lesson of Jesus' parable about a lost sheep? This parable gives us a glimpse of the heart of a true shepherd, and the joy of a community reunited with its lost members. Shepherds not only had to watch over their sheep by day and by night; they also had to protect them from wolves and lions who preyed upon them, and from dangerous terrain and storms. Shepherds often had large flocks, sometimes numbering in the hundreds or thousands. It was common to inspect and count the sheep at the end of the day. You can imagine the surprise and grief of the shepherd who discovers that one of his sheep is missing! Does he wait until the next day to go looking for it? Or does he ask a neighboring shepherd if he might have seen the stray sheep? No, he goes immediately in search of this lost sheep. Delay for even one night could mean disaster leading to death. Sheep by nature are very social creatures. An isolated sheep can quickly become bewildered, disoriented, and even neurotic. Easy prey for wolves and lions!

The shepherd's grief and anxiety is turned to joy when he finds the lost sheep and restores it to the fold. The shepherd searches until what he has lost is found. His persistence pays off. What was new in Jesus' teaching was the insistence that sinners must be sought out time and time again. How easy to forget and be distracted with other matters while the lost become prey for devouring wolves of the soul. The Apostle Peter reminds us that the "devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). God does not rejoice in the loss of anyone, but desires that we be saved and restored to friendship with him. That is why the whole community of heaven rejoices when one sinner is found and restored to fellowship with God. God is on a rescue mission today to save us from the destructive forces of sin and evil. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, watches over every step we take. Do you listen to his voice and heed his wise counsel? Do you follow the path he has set for you - a path that leads to life rather than death?

The housewife who lost a coin faced something of an economic disaster, since the value of the coin would be equivalent to her husband's daily wage. What would she say to her husband when he returned home from work? They were poor and would suffer greatly because of the loss. Her grief and anxiety turn to joy when she finds the coin.

Both the shepherd and the housewife "search until what they have lost is found". Their persistence pays off. They both instinctively share their joy with the whole community. The poor are particularly good at sharing in one another's sorrows and joys. The restoration of the prodigal son ends with a festive party celebrated by the whole community. What was new in Jesus' teaching was the insistence that sinners must be sought out and not merely mourned for. God does not rejoice in the loss of anyone, but desires that all be saved and restored to fellowship with him. That is why the whole community of heaven rejoices when one sinner is found and restored to fellowship with God.

"Lord Jesus, nothing escapes your watchful gaze and care. May I always walk in the light of your truth and never stray from your loving presence."

The Two Debtors

Scripture: *Luke 7:40-50*

40 And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "What is it, Teacher?" 41 "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." 48 And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" 50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Meditation: Jesus, in his customary fashion, never lost the opportunity to draw a lesson from an incident. When a noted rabbi invited Jesus to dinner, a public sinner crashed the party and washed Jesus' feet with her tears (see [Luke 7:36-39](#)). Her action upset the host who complained to Jesus. Why did Jesus put the parable of the two debtors before his "learned host", a rabbi and teacher of the people? This parable is similar to the parable of the [unforgiving official](#) (see Matthew 18:23-35) in which the man who was forgiven much showed himself merciless and unforgiving. This man was completely callous because he could neither believe in love, accept it or give it. Who is to be pitied most? Those who cannot receive love or those who cannot give love? Jesus makes clear that great love springs from a heart forgiven and cleansed. "Love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8), "for love is of God" (1 John 4:7). The woman's lavish expression of love was proof that she had found favor with God. The stark contrast of attitudes between Simon and the woman of ill-repute, demonstrate how we can either accept or reject God's mercy. Simon, who regarded himself as an upright Pharisee, felt no need for love or mercy. His self-sufficiency kept him from acknowledging his need for God's grace. Are you grateful for God's mercy and grace?

"Lord, your grace is sufficient for me. Fill my heart with love and gratitude for the mercy you have shown to me and give me freedom and joy to love and serve others as you have taught."

The Prodigal Son

Scripture: *Luke 15:11-32*

1 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." 3 So he told them this parable:

11 And he said, "There was a man who had two sons; 12 and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. 13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. 14 And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. 15 So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" 20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; 23 and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; 24 for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' 28 But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, 29 but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' 31 And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

Meditation: Jesus' story of the father and his two sons (sometimes called the parable of the prodigal son) is the longest parable in the gospels. What is the main point or focus of the story? Is it the contrast between an obedient and a disobedient son or is it between the warm reception given to a spendthrift son by his father and the cold reception given by the eldest son? Jesus contrasts the father's merciful love with the eldest son's somewhat harsh reaction to his errant brother and to the lavish party his joyful father throws for his repentant son. While the errant son had wasted his father's money, his father, nonetheless, maintained unbroken love for his son. The son, while he was away, learned a lot about himself. And he realized that his father had given him love which he had not returned. He had yet to learn about the depth of his father's love for him. His deep humiliation at finding himself obliged to feed on the husks of pigs and his

reflection on all he had lost, led to his repentance and decision to declare himself guilty before his father. While he hoped for reconciliation with his father, he could not have imagined a full restoration of relationship. The father did not need to speak words of forgiveness to his son; his actions spoke more loudly and clearly! The beautiful robe, the ring, and the festive banquet symbolize the new life – pure, worthy, and joyful – of anyone who returns to God.

The prodigal could not return to the garden of innocence, but he was welcomed and reinstated as a son. The errant son's dramatic change from grief and guilt to forgiveness and restoration express in picture-language the resurrection from the dead, a rebirth to new life from spiritual death. The parable also contrasts mercy and its opposite – unforgiveness. The father who had been wronged, was forgiving. But the eldest son, who had not been wronged, was unforgiving. His unforgiveness turns into contempt and pride. And his resentment leads to his isolation and estrangement from the community of forgiven sinners. In this parable Jesus gives a vivid picture of God and what God is like. God is truly kinder than us. He does not lose hope or give up when we stray. He rejoices in finding the lost and in welcoming them home. Do you know the joy of repentance and the restoration of relationship as a son or daughter of your heavenly Father?

"Lord Jesus, may I never doubt your love nor take for granted the mercy you have shown to me. Fill me with your transforming love that I may be merciful as you are merciful."

The Tower Builder & the Warlord

Scripture: *Luke 14:27-33*

27 Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple. 28 For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build, and was not able to finish.' 31 Or what king, going to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32 And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an embassy and asks terms of peace. 33 So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Meditation: What does the parable of the tower builder and a ruler on a war campaign have in common? Both risk serious loss if they don't carefully plan ahead. In a shame and honor culture they want to avoid at all costs being mocked by their community for failing to complete a task they began in earnest. This double parable echoes the instruction of Proverbs: "By wisdom a house is built" and "by wise guidance you can wage a war" to ensure victory (Proverbs 24:3-6). Every landowner who could afford it walled in his orchard as a protection from intruders who might steal or harm his produce. A tower was usually built in a corner of the wall and a guard posted especially during harvest time when thieves would likely try to make off with the goods. Starting a building-project, like a watchtower, and leaving it unfinished because of poor planning would invite the scorn of the whole village. Likewise a king who decided to wage a war against an opponent who was much stronger, would be considered foolish if he did not come up with a plan that had a decent chance of success.

Jesus tells his would-be disciples that they, too, must count the cost if they want to succeed as his disciples. Jesus assures success for those willing to pay the price. All it cost is everything! What does Jesus have to offer that's worth giving up everything else? More than we can imagine! Jesus offers the gift of abundant life and everlasting peace and happiness with God. (See the [parable of the treasure](#) hidden in the field and [the pearl of great price](#) in Matthew 13:44-45). It's natural to ask what it's going to cost before you sign up or pay for something. Jesus was utterly honest and spared no words to tell his disciples that it would cost them dearly to follow after him. There can be no room for compromise or concession with God. We either give our lives over to him completely or we keep them for ourselves. Paul the Apostle says, "*We are not our own. We were bought with a price*" (1 Cor. 6:19b,20). That price is the blood of Jesus shed for us on the cross.

Jesus knew that the way of the cross was the Father's way to glory and victory over sin and death. He counted the cost and said "yes" to his Father's will. We, too, must "count the cost" and be ready to follow Jesus in the way of the cross if we want to share in his glory and victory. What is the "way of the cross" for you and for me? When my will crosses with God's will, then his will must be done. The way of the cross involves sacrifice, the sacrifice of laying down my life each and every day for Jesus' sake. What makes such sacrifice possible and "sweet" for us is the love of God poured out for us in the blood of Jesus Christ. Paul the Apostle reminds us that "*God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit*" (Romans 5:5). We can never outgive God. He always gives us more than we can expect or imagine. Do you allow the Holy Spirit to fill your heart with the love of God?

The love of God compels us to choose who or what will be first in our lives. To place any relationship or any possession above God is a form of idolatry. Jesus challenges his disciples to examine who they love first. Jesus' way to glory and power is opposite the world's way of glory and power. The choice is ours, but the Lord does not leave us alone if we choose to follow him. Does the love of Christ compel you to put God first in all you do (see 2 Cor. 5)?

"Lord, may your love consume me and transform my life that I may truly desire nothing more than life with you. Help me to count the cost and to joyfully embrace the cross for your sake."

The Mustard Seed and the Leaven

Scripture: *Matthew 13:31-35* ([Mark 4:30-32](#); [Luke 13:18 f.](#))

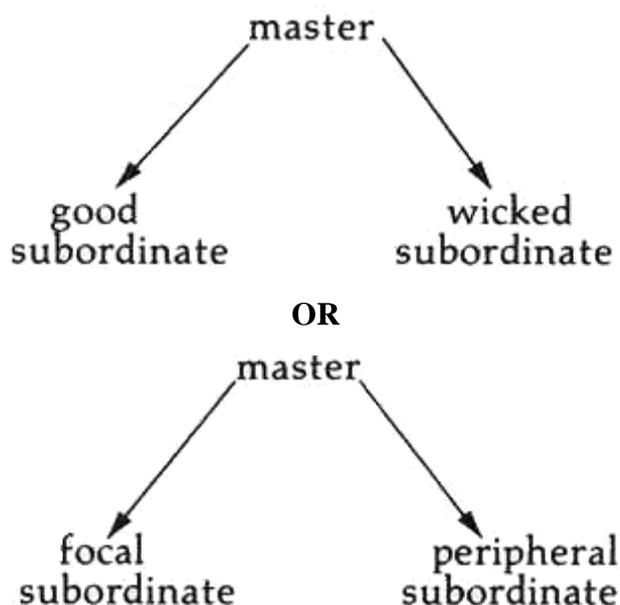
31 Another parable he put before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." 33 He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened." 34 All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable. 35 This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world."

Meditation: What can mustard seeds and leaven teach us about the kingdom of God? The tiny mustard seed literally grew to be a tree which attracted numerous birds because they loved the little black mustard seed it produced. God's kingdom works in a similar fashion. It starts from the smallest beginnings in the hearts of men and women who are receptive to God's word. And it works unseen and causes a transformation from within. Leaven is another powerful agent of change. A lump of dough left to itself remains just what it is, a lump of dough. But when the leaven is added to it a transformation takes place which produces rich and wholesome bread when heated -- the staple of life for humans. The kingdom of God produces a transformation in those who receive the new life which Jesus Christ offers. When we yield to Jesus Christ, our lives are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. Paul the Apostle says, "we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor. 4:7). Do you believe in the transforming power of the Holy Spirit?

"Lord, fill me with your Holy Spirit and transform me into the Christ-like holiness you desire. Increase my zeal for your kingdom and instill in me a holy desire to live for your greater glory."

Simple Three-Point Parables

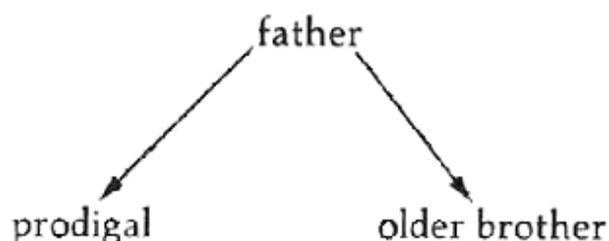
MANY OF JESUS' PARABLES HAVE THREE MAIN CHARACTERS. Quite frequently, these characters include an authority figure and two contrasting subordinates. The authority figure, usually a king, father or master, typically acts as a judge between the two subordinates, who in turn exhibit contrasting behavior (see diagram below).



These have been called *monarchic* parables, since in each case the central or unifying character (the character who directly relates to each of the other two) is the master or king figure. Often the particular underling, a servant or son, who would have seemed to a first-century Jewish audience to have acted in a praiseworthy manner, is declared to be less righteous than his apparently wicked counterpart. Jesus stands conventional expectation on its head.

One of the best-loved of all Jesus' parables, the story of the prodigal son, clearly illustrates this structural paradigm. It also highlights the problems facing those who would divorce parable from allegory and restrict a parable's meaning to one main point. This parable will be examined in some detail, therefore, followed by a more cursory look at other parables with this same simple three-point or "triadic" structure. Since chapters three and four have already surveyed the most significant differences between parallel accounts of the same parable, usually only the earliest version of each passage will be discussed here. Exceptions include those parallels which are so similar that no version is demonstrably earlier, and those which may not be parallel at all.

6.1 The Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11–32)



The parable of the prodigal son poses special problems for the theory that parables can make only one main point. Its traditional title suggests that the main purpose of the narrative is to encourage all sinners to repent, regardless of the extent to which they may have degraded themselves. This is the feature of the story which first strikes many readers, challenging their natural inclination to judge the prodigal severely. Yet many scholars would point to the second, climactic portion of the story and find the primary emphasis on the rebuke to the hardhearted older brother.⁴ Then the main point becomes one about the need to rejoice in the salvation of others.

Some commentators solve this dilemma by affirming both points and conceding that this is a rare example of a “two-pointed” parable. They observe that the story subdivides neatly into two episodes—verses 11–24 focusing on the younger brother, and verses 25–32 on the older one—whereas most of Jesus’ parables are shorter and less clearly divisible. By far the most common approach suggests yet a different main point by concentrating on the role of the father of the two sons as the character who unites both “halves” of the narrative. Then the theme of the story is revealed in the father’s extraordinary love and patience with both his sons.

It is hard to deny the presence of any of these three themes in the parable, and it is not easy to combine them all into one simple proposition. A few commentators have rejected the authenticity of verses 25–32 precisely because it does seem to tack on an extra section to an otherwise self-contained story about the return of the wayward son. But Mary Tolbert has shown that there is close structural parallelism between both halves, suggesting that they were a unity from the start. Each section divides into four units alternating between narrated discourse (ND) and direct discourse (DD):

A	[ND] the younger son’s journey(vv. 12b–16) away
B	[DD] his decision to return (vv. 17–19)
C	[ND] his father’s reception (v. 20)
D	[DD] his confession and his(vv. 21–24a) father’s response
A’	[ND] the older son’s return(vv. 24b–26) home
B’	[DD] the servant’s explanation (v. 27)
C’	[ND] his father’s reception (v. 28)
D’	[DD] his accusation and his Father’s response (vv. 29–32)

Verbal parallels further highlight this symmetry—references to the field in A and A', to the father and his servants in B and B', to coming in and out in C and C', and most importantly to killing the fatted calf and making merry in D and D'. The key refrain of “was dead and is alive” and “was lost and is found” then concludes both major sections. Even the opening verses of the parable by themselves require the episode about the prodigal to have a sequel. Otherwise there would be no need to include the phrases “two sons,” “the younger of them,” “give me the share,” and “he divided between them.”

In fact, the parable may just as easily subdivide into three rather than two episodes, one for each of the three main characters: verses 11–20a—the younger son’s departure and return; verses 20b–24—the father’s welcome; verses 25–32—the older son’s reaction. The most compelling resolution of the problem of the parable’s meaning therefore seems to be to affirm that it teaches three main points, one per character, and, in this case, one per episode. (1) *Even, as the prodigal always had the option of repenting and returning home, so also all sinners, however wicked, may confess their sins and turn to God in contrition.* (2) *Even as the father went to elaborate lengths to offer reconciliation to the prodigal, so also God offers all people, however undeserving, lavish forgiveness of sins if they are willing to accept it.* (3) *Even as the older brother should not have begrudged his brother’s reinstatement but rather rejoiced in it, so those who claim to be God’s people should be glad and not mad that he extends his grace even to the most undeserving.*

Different members of Jesus’ audience would have identified themselves most closely with different characters in the parable, so that one of these points might have come across more strongly to them than the others. Those who hear the parable today may also tend to identify with just one of the individuals in the story, so that it is helpful to listen to the parable three times, trying to understand the action from the perspective of a different character each time. But any attempt to exclude a particular perspective loses sight of a key teaching of Jesus.

The three main points of the parable also illustrate the impossibility of avoiding an allegorical interpretation. Each character clearly stands for someone other than himself. Virtually every commentator notices the close correlation between the prodigal and the “tax collectors and sinners” (v. 1), with whom Jesus was criticized for associating, and between the older brother and the “Pharisees and scribes” who leveled that criticism (v. 2), even though many think that these two verses reflect Luke’s later interpretation.

Some find the portrait of the older brother as either too stark or too muted to be a true representation of the Jewish leaders, but these criticisms overlook the great diversity of viewpoints and behavior found within ancient Pharisaism. On the one hand, Jesus is not tarring all Pharisees with the same brush, merely those who have criticized him at this particular time.¹² On the other hand, the father’s approach to the older brother is gentle enough to suggest that, at least on this occasion, Jesus is not challenging the sincerity of the Pharisees’ questions or the genuineness of their loyalty to God.

Since the prodigal speaks of having sinned against “heaven” (i.e., God) as well as his father (vv. 18, 21), the direct equation of the father with God at first glance seems dubious. Nevertheless, as noted previously (p. 42), even Jeremias admits that the father is at least “an image of God.” A. M. Hunter’s conclusion seems sound when he declares, “beyond doubt, in the mind of Jesus the father stood for God, the elder brother for the Scribes and Pharisees, and the prodigal for publicans and sinners.”¹⁵ But, contra Hunter, this symbolism is precisely what makes the parable an allegory, as chapter two has demonstrated. The “life-likeness” of the narrative in no way undermines this literary classification.

The parable, however, is not quite as lifelike as many have alleged. Would a first-century Jewish son have dared to ask his father for his share of the inheritance while the father was still alive and in good health? Would the father have capitulated so readily? Although a few scholars have argued that both practices were not at all unusual, it seems likely that at the very least such behavior would have appeared as “deplorable.”¹⁷ Kenneth Bailey goes so far as to interpret the son’s request as equivalent to a wish that his father were dead, and the father’s response as an almost inconceivable expression of patience and love.

The issue is complicated by a lack of detailed evidence for the legal situation presupposed by the narrative. It is more generally agreed that the father’s later welcome for the returning prodigal was certainly atypical. However inwardly glad he may have been to see his son again, no older, self-respecting Middle Eastern male head of an estate would have disgraced himself by the undignified action of running to greet his son (v. 20). Nor would he have interrupted the son’s speech before a full display of repentance (cf. v. 21 with vv. 18–19) or instantly commanded such a luxurious outpouring of affection for him (vv. 22–23). All of these details strongly suggest that Jesus wanted to present his audience with more than a simple, realistic picture of family life. Rather he used an extraordinary story to illustrate God’s amazing patience and love for his ungrateful children.

A history of the interpretation of this parable shows that commentators from earliest days recognized that the father and his two sons each stood for individuals or groups of people other than themselves. The only debate centered on how that symbolism was to be defined. Yves Tissot identifies four main approaches that proliferated in the first centuries of the church’s existence. All agreed that the father stood for God (or Jesus), but they differed as to the identities of the two sons: (1) A “gnosticizing” approach equated the older son with the angels and the younger son with humanity. (2) An “ethical” view saw in these two figures the righteous and sinners of the world in general. (3) An “ethnic” interpretation linked them with Israel and the heathen. (4) A “penitential” option, finally, saw the Christian rigorist contrasted with the less legalistic believer.

Of these four, modern scholars have opted more for (3) than for (1), (2) or (4). (1) and (4) are clearly anachronistic for a *Sitz im Leben Jesu*, while (2) does not anchor the parable in as specific a life-setting as (3). But none of these four does justice to Luke 15:1–2, where both outcasts and righteous are groups of Israelites. On the other hand, each of the four is intelligible as an attempt to *apply* the parable in a different religious context. Here the previously discussed distinction between meaning and significance is helpful (see above, pp. 159–60).

Only the people in view behind the characters of the parable when it was originally spoken may be said to reflect its meaning, but to the extent that analogous groups or individuals appear in other life-settings, the parable may be applied more widely. John Purdy offers an insightful contemporary illustration of this process in his application of selected parables to the modern world of daily work, and he effectively balances the significance of each of the main characters in this particular passage:

The workplace, which knows all too well the wasteful tendencies of the younger son and the harshness of the elder, needs also the extravagant love of the father. Such mercy can season the workplace and make it more humane. It can bring peace to the inner warfare of the individual worker. It can bring peace between the overachievers and those who fall far short of perfection. We do not have to choose between the two sons. We may choose to be like the father.

In no sense does this exposition describe the original meaning of the parable, but it aptly encapsulates its significance in one particular, later context.

Admitting that the parable is allegorical to the extent that each of the “secular” characters stands for his “spiritual” counterpart does not require one to allegorize additional details. All the remaining elements of the narrative are props, used only to illustrate the nature and fortunes of the primary actors. The servants function only to carry out their masters’ bidding; they are simply the means by which the family members act. Praying to “heaven” is not an independent detail which disqualifies the father from functioning as a symbol for God but is just part of the story line in which God and the father *are* separate.

The particular nature of the prodigal’s sin and his first attempts to remedy it when famine comes add poignancy to his plight and indicate the depths of his degradation but should not be taken to stand for specific types of misfortune or squalor. The robe, ring, shoes, and fatted calf which await his return all highlight the extent of his restoration but once again should not be given independent significance. All these details fit in with known customs and experiences of Jesus’ day and merely add to the force of the main points which derive from the main characters. They could easily have been abbreviated, expanded or replaced without altering the three key lessons of the parable. Here is where the ancient allegorizers so often went astray.²⁴

A final point stemming from Purdy’s exposition is appropriate. Unlike several of the parables discussed below, which contrast good and bad subordinates of a master, this narrative presents neither son as a model uniformly to be followed or avoided. God delights in the repentance of prodigals, but he would prefer that they not have to sink so low before coming to their senses. God cherishes the faithfulness of those who obey his will but does not want them to despise the rebellious who have repented. The parable is strikingly open-ended. Did the older brother come in the house and join the festivities? Jesus does not say, and it misreads the parable to attempt to answer the question. The important fact is that the invitation remains for all who hear or read and are willing to respond and rejoice.¹

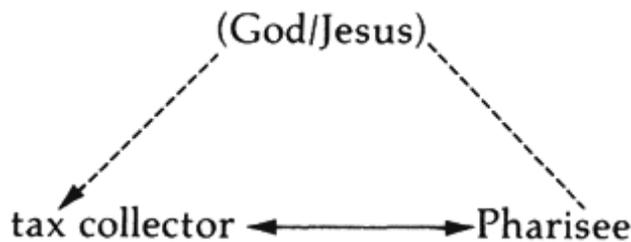
¹ Blomberg, C. (1990). *Interpreting the parables* (172–179). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Two-Point & One-Point Parables by C. Blomberg

NOT ALL PARABLES HAVE THREE MAIN CHARACTERS OR MAKE three main points, common though that pattern may be. Many shorter narratives and similes have only two key actors or objects, and a few have only one. This does not mean that they are not allegorical but rather that the allegories are less elaborate and the number of referents fewer. Some parables border on being triadic but ultimately prove dyadic, or two-pointed. Others share features of both dyadic and monadic, or one-pointed, forms. Many short metaphors also make just one point but are not included here. The boundary between full-fledged parable and simple metaphor is fluid; two different books on the parables seldom agree exactly as to what should be classified as parabolic. This chapter will survey all the remaining passages in the Gospels usually termed parables and will consider them in order of decreasing complexity.

8.1 Two-Point Parables

8.1.1 *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk 18:9–14)*



This parable forms a fitting transition from an examination of triadic parables to a study of dyadic ones. It contains the identical type of contrast between good and bad characters, with a surprising role-reversal, found in passages already considered. The parables of the rich man and Lazarus and the good Samaritan offer the closest parallels. The only difference is that here there is no third, unifying figure to judge between the other two. In a sense, Jesus himself fills the role of the judge, pronouncing in the closing verse of the passage God's evaluation of the two men's prayers. But Jesus makes no third point in addition to the obvious two about the one man being justified and the other one not. Indeed, the whole structure of the parable argues for seeing it as two-pointed, with the sharp alternation from Pharisee to tax collector highlighting the contrast between them. The structure may be outlined as A-B-A-B-B-A-A-B, with A standing for the action of the Pharisee and B for that of the tax collector.

1. (A) Pharisee (v. 10a)
2. (B) tax collector (v. 10b)
3. (A) Pharisee (vv. 11–12)
4. (B) tax collector (v. 13)
5. (B) tax collector (v. 14a)
6. (A) Pharisee (v. 14b)
7. (A) Pharisee (v. 14c)
8. (B) tax collector (v. 14d)

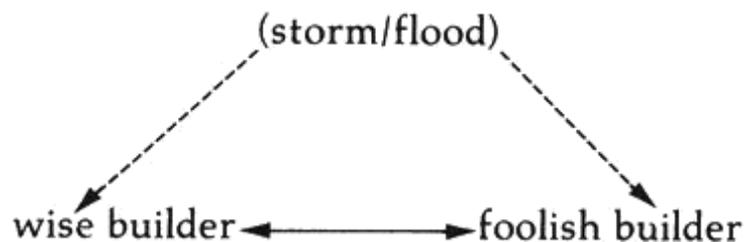
The brief inversion of the two elements in the fifth and sixth positions of this outline underlines the climactic reversal of the main characters' status and highlights the shock Jesus' verdict would have created in its first setting. Modern stereotypes concerning the Pharisees must not blind readers to the uniform expectation of Jesus' original audience that the Pharisee would be the hero of the story instead of the tax collector.

On the other hand, one must not go so far as to allege that the portrait of the Pharisee here is a caricature which could not have fit any real-life Jew in a *Sitz im Leben Jesu*, thus requiring one to see part or all of the parable as inauthentic and stemming from a later anti-Jewish polemic. There were both arrogant and humble Pharisees in ancient Judaism, as the Talmud itself later admitted (b. Sot. 22b). The standard prayer in which the pious Jewish man thanks God that he is not a slave, a Gentile or a woman (cf. b. Men. 43b) comes very close to expressing the attitude with which Jesus takes issue here (and cf. Paul in Gal 3:28). In fact, little in the actions or prayers of either man proves extraordinary, except perhaps the tax man's beating on his chest, a dramatic gesture usually reserved for women and used by men only in times of extreme emotion.⁴ The parable is perhaps the closest to a pure example story one finds, with each man standing for all others like him—either self-righteous or penitent.

Verse 14b, the only portion of the parable usually labeled inauthentic, captures these conclusions, and so it must not be jettisoned. That this generalizing conclusion appears elsewhere (Mt 18:4, 23:12; Lk 14:11) is no counterargument; the maxim is appropriate in numerous contexts. Verse 14a suggests such a radical verdict that some kind of explanation is required to substantiate it. The summary of the two men's behavior as self-exaltation and self-humiliation is apt. Nor should anything be made of the absence of explicit reference to atonement as the necessary ground for justification. These are still pre-crucifixion days, and the natural time for these two men to be praying publicly in the temple would after all be at an hour of sacrifice. In fact, the tax collector's cry, "Be merciful to me" (ἰλάσθητί μοι) might well be translated, "Let me be atoned." The reference to justification actually makes the parable's conclusion one of the most "Pauline" pieces of all of Jesus' teaching.

The parable thus makes two main points which can scarcely be better summarized than by Jesus' own refrain. (1) *He who exalts himself will be humbled, and (2) he who humbles himself will be exalted.* Applications are numerous but the one that is the most crucial involves God's exaltation or humiliation of individuals at the final judgment. Whichever one of these two attitudes has reflected our relationship with God in this life, the opposite will characterize our status in the next. The beatitudes and woes in Luke's Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:20–26) provide perhaps the best biblical commentary on this parable.

8.1.2 *The Two Builders* (Mt 7:24–27; Lk 6:47–49)



Like the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, the story of the two builders depicts a dramatic contrast between wise and foolish actions—construction which survives severe testing and that which collapses. Here the imagery is more conventional; the verdict, what one would expect.

The fact that people literally do build houses without adequate foundations, however, remains a poignant testimony to the foolishness of human behavior in the material realm and makes the parable an apt illustration of a similar lack of preparation in the spiritual realm.

In the last parable, Jesus' own verdict decided between the two characters; here, the storm, a typical metaphor for judgment or crisis, decides the fate of each. At the level of application one may undoubtedly appeal to this narrative to encourage preparation for numerous types of crises, but in his original preaching Jesus almost certainly had in mind the climactic end of the age. At the same time, the fact that the specific reward granted the wise builder is simply the preservation of his building may point to the fact that the foundations of spiritual structures which will endure in the world to come are laid in the present age.

The parallelism in language, especially in Matthew's version, highlights the similarities and differences between the two builders. Each builds a house, perhaps with no visible, outward differences between them. Each experiences the identical storm or flood, but one building stands while the other falls. The idea of a house on a rock vs. one on sand (Matthew), or of one with a foundation vs. one without (Luke), naturally suggests wise and foolish behavior. But without the specific comparison with those who hear Jesus' words and do not obey them vs. those who hear and do obey, a multitude of interpretations might suggest themselves.

Thus an explanation of the imagery, here by the explicit use of simile, is necessary if the meaning of the parable is to be clear. Interestingly, very few objections have ever been raised to the authenticity of this parable or its interpretation. Details, to be sure, were altered in transmission to preserve the intelligibility of the story in a Hellenistic world (see above, p. 81), inasmuch as the identical lessons can be expressed through diverse imagery. But the unity of the whole is freely admitted.

Ulrich Luz's major critical commentary on Matthew states plainly: "The double parable is a unity and not further divisible. The contents of the picture speak in favor of Matthew's version being the more original. It can stem from Jesus." G. B. Caird is equally forthright and concise about the two main points which then follow from the contrasting pictures of the two builders: "The man who hears and does is safe against every crisis, while the man who only hears is inviting disaster."¹¹

One might rephrase Caird's conclusion to focus more explicitly on the ultimate crisis that all persons must face and therefore state the parable's lessons like this: (1) *The person who responds to the gospel with obedience will survive God's final judgment intact.* (2) *The person who refuses to follow Christ in discipleship, on the other hand, will be destroyed on that last day.* Coming at the end of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain, which has graphically depicted Jesus' understanding of discipleship, the parable leaves its hearers with no good reason for refusing Christ's appeal.²

² Blomberg, C. (1990). *Interpreting the parables* (256–260). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

8.2 One-Point Parables

It is virtually impossible to tell a story, however brief, without introducing at least two main characters or a subject and an object. Without *interaction* it is very difficult to have *any* action. Conceivably, then, none of Jesus' parables is meant to make only one solitary point. Nevertheless, at least six of the passages usually included in a study of the parables seem to be so brief and to concentrate so intensively on the protagonist of the plot that they may be grouped into a distinct category of parables. These appear to offer only one central truth. Interestingly, the six appear as three pairs of closely matched illustrations.

8.2.1 *The Hidden Treasure and Pearl of Great Price (Mt 13:44–46)*

These two very brief similes so closely resemble each other in both structure and meaning that they must be considered together. Despite the variation in introductory formulas ("the kingdom is like a treasure/ like a man ..."), it is clear that Jesus is comparing the kingdom of God to the treasure and to the pearl. The man who discovers the treasure, like the merchant who purchases the pearl, stands for anyone who becomes a "child of the kingdom," that is a disciple of Jesus. In this sense, there are two foci to each parable, but it seems natural to formulate the parables' message in one short sentence: *The kingdom of God is so valuable that it is worth sacrificing anything to gain it.* One could plausibly argue that this sentence in fact contains two points, so that perhaps it should be considered dyadic. Yet it is not clear that the two clauses of the sentence are discrete. The central theme in each remains that of the value of the kingdom. Just as the first two parables in this chapter demonstrated the fluidity of the boundary between triadic and dyadic parables, so these two texts indicate a similar overlap between dyadic and monadic forms.

The refrain which the two passages repeat in identical language highlights the need to sell all for the sake of the treasure or pearl. But we do not purchase the kingdom; quite the contrary, God rules entirely by grace. Some would resolve this apparent contradiction by making the treasure finder and pearl merchant symbols for Christ, who purchased his people with his death, but this approach interprets the metaphor too woodenly.

An early rabbinic parable likens the pilgrimage of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan to a merchant who in a far-off land discovers a treasure which he purchases (Mekilta Beshallah 2:142ff.). Yet no Jew would have dared to think of Israel as buying the Promised Land from God. Nevertheless, Jesus' teaching elsewhere is clear; for many individuals financial sacrifice is required before other commitments can give way to the priorities of God (e.g., Lk 19:1–10), and for some this may require selling all (e.g., Lk 18:18–30). For those who do not literally sell anything in becoming disciples, the potential must always be present. They must be willing to risk all, if the priorities of the kingdom threaten the security of their earthly existence.

Crossan's deconstructionist interpretation in which abandoning all includes abandoning the parable and then "abandoning abandonment" discloses the self-defeating results of his method rather than a legitimate interpretation of the passage. At the opposite extreme, the type of new hermeneutic reflected in Fuchs's attempt to make the passage say exactly the opposite of what it does, namely, that would-be disciples should do nothing and leave all the activity to God, proves equally arbitrary.⁶⁸

Details not to be overly stressed include the joy of the discovery of the treasure. Although finding God's kingdom is a joy, this point is not repeated in the parable of the pearl and can scarcely be said to summarize the sole main point of the two passages. Even more peripheral are the ethics of the man who hid the treasure he had found in order to purchase the field from its unsuspecting owner. Commentators have taken diametrically opposite stances on the legality and

morality of this subterfuge, but enough devious characters have appeared in the parables so far surveyed that interpreters need not be deflected from the main point which lies elsewhere.⁷⁰

Much could be made of the treasure's hiddenness in light of the imperceptible growth of the kingdom in the parable of the seed growing secretly. But because the story line requires the man to bury the treasure again in order for his scheme to succeed, it seems dubious to derive any allegorical meaning from it. The main variation between the two passages may be more significant. The two who discover their windfalls include one who is deliberately looking for "good buys" (the pearl merchant) as well as one who stumbles across his treasure (the first man). Jesus may therefore be calling both the individual who is diligently searching for spiritual riches as well as the person who is entirely apathetic toward God to give up whatever stands between them and the kingdom.

8.2.2 The Tower Builder and the Warring King (Lk 14:28–33)

Luke 14:28–32 presents a pair of short τίς ἐξ ὑμῶν ("which one of you ...?") parables with closely parallel structure. The basic meaning of the two seems similar and self-evident: do not get involved in something which you are unable to complete. The examples, however, vary in degree of seriousness. The man who is unable to finish building a tower risks only ridicule from his community and the possible loss of financial investment. The man who fails to realize that he is outnumbered in battle risks losing his kingdom, his soldiers and his life. This difference suggests that the passage is arranged in a climactic sequence and explains why Jesus' conclusion seems still more severe: "Whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (v. 33).

This conclusion goes beyond the point of either parable, but it should not therefore be classified as secondary; it brings to a climax the series of three declarations (vv. 28–30, 31–32, 33). The a fortiori nature of τίς ἐξ ὑμῶν parables supports this interpretation. If people must carefully calculate their chances of success in major human endeavors, how much more so must they take seriously the results of spiritual commitments.

Verse 33, however, has posed problems for commentators for other reasons too. Most notably, it seems to be establishing a more radical definition of discipleship than that which Jesus employs elsewhere. Some therefore think that these parables at first applied only to a select core of Jesus' disciples, or that they were addressed only to those who had already committed themselves to him to warn them against half-hearted loyalty. But "to renounce all" does not necessarily mean literally to abandon all. As noted above, Jesus sometimes does make that demand of an individual, but many times he does not. Rather the idea is one of giving up anything which would stand in the way of full-fledged service for Christ. The actual implementation of this principle will vary from person to person and situation to situation, but it probably should involve most modern Westerners in much more serious soul-searching concerning the use of their possessions than they might otherwise suspect.⁷²

Problems with the two parables themselves often revolve around the seeming impossibility of counting the cost of Christian discipleship. Most people who come to faith have little idea of what the future will hold or what sacrifices their commitment will involve. Perhaps this reflects more on the shallow nature of many conversions than on any inherent problems in Jesus' parables. Even in the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* in which Luke places this parable, Jesus, as he travels under the shadow of the cross, has given the crowds enough exposure to the nature of his ministry for him to expect them to realize that he is taking the role of a suffering Messiah before his triumphal return. If men and women want to identify with him, they too must be prepared to sacrifice whatever is required to remain faithful to the way of the cross.

In passing, it might be good to note that this passage seems to presuppose some interval of time in which its demands can be implemented. Commitment proves itself only over the long haul. This “delay” before Christ’s return balances the often overemphasized theme of imminence in other teachings of Jesus.

A novel approach to the interpretation of these two little parables tries to offset the apparent harshness of their application by assuming that the tower builder and warring king both stand for Jesus (or God) rather than for would-be disciples. God in Christ is thus the one who determined to sacrifice all, by means of the crucifixion. J. D. M. Derrett has set out the case for this interpretation in great detail, noting, for example, that (a) other τίς ἐξ ὑμῶν parables usually teach something about the nature of God from the actions of the main character (recall the sleeping friend in Lk 11:5–8, or the shepherd and woman in Lk 15:3–10); (b) a king regularly stands for God in Jesus’ parables; and (c) Jesus elsewhere enjoins his followers to faith rather than to calculation.

On the other hand, contra (a), Luke 12:25 introduces a similar rhetorical question in which the focus is on human actions rather than God’s behavior (“which of you by being anxious can add a cubit to his span of life?”).

As for (b), verse 31 actually speaks of two kings. Both cannot stand for God, so it is more natural to take the one who is assessing his inferior position to stand for a human individual rather than God. If one of the kings stands for God, it should be the second, more powerful one. But in light of the fact that the parables deal with the challenge of the kingdom rather than the nature of the king, the imagery should probably be taken more generally. Jesus does not elsewhere scare his audiences into the kingdom by asking them to consider if they can withstand God’s powerful onslaught, nor would there be any reason to ask them to calculate whether or not they could successfully resist. Destruction would be inevitable.

Derrett’s final point (c) sets up a false dichotomy. Jesus teaches both faith and calculation elsewhere, as those passages make clear which warn about not having anywhere to sleep and not putting one’s hand to the plow and turning back (Lk 9:57–62 par.). The syntax of verses 31–32, moreover, requires the man who considers whether or not he should sue for peace to be the same figure which Derrett says stands for God, yet it is inconceivable that God should consider surrendering to his enemy (which is what the phrase “asks for terms of peace” seems most likely to mean).

The parables are best taken, then, of human activity, and their one main point may be phrased as follows: *Would-be disciples must consider the commitment required to follow Christ.* The verbal repetition of the refrain, “does he not first sit down and count the cost/take counsel?” confirms this central focus. Caird’s conclusions combine meaning and significance and merit extended citation:

The twin parables of the tower-builder and the king were not meant to deter any serious candidates for discipleship, but only to warn them that becoming a disciple was the most important enterprise a man could undertake and deserved at least as much consideration as he would give to business or politics. Nobody can be swept into the kingdom on a flood-tide of emotion; he must walk in with clear-eyed deliberation.

8.2.3 *The Mustard Seed and Leaven (Lk 13:18–21 pars.)*

At least in their Q form, the twin parables of the mustard seed and leaven each introduce one human character, the man who sows the seed and the woman who leavens the bread. Mark, who only records the mustard-seed parable, does not mention a sower but simply uses the passive expression, “it is sown.” This makes explicit what is already implicit in Q, that the man and the

woman have no significant role to play in the two short similes. The parables are entirely about the mustard seed and leaven, and the human characters are introduced only because seeds do not plant themselves and bread does not leaven itself.

The main “character” in both cases, then, is the small plant—the seed and the yeast—but each is depicted in two contrasting stages. Remarkably small beginnings produce amazingly large results. Unlike the seed growing secretly, there is no emphasis on the period of development; it is mentioned only in passing. Thus, despite their traditional classification with the other parables of growth, they do not really belong in this category. Only one central point seems intended: *The kingdom will eventually attain to significant proportions despite its entirely inauspicious outset.*

In the parable of the mustard seed, all three accounts conclude with an allusion to Ezekiel 17:23 and related Old Testament passages (esp. Ezek 31:6; Dan 4:12; Ps 104:12), in which the birds of the air come to nest in the branches of the mighty cedar of Lebanon. In that context the birds stand for all the peoples of the earth, that is, predominantly the Gentiles. It is hard to know if such a meaning is intended in Jesus’ parable as well. The lowly mustard plant, even though it can occasionally reach heights of ten to twelve feet and be legitimately considered a small shade tree, pales in comparison with the lofty cedar. Nevertheless, there may be deliberate irony in this choice of imagery.

Alternately, Jesus may have chosen the mustard seed simply because it was proverbial for its smallness. He then could hardly avoid the fact that it did not grow up to be as large a tree as the cedar. The striking contrast could still be made, and the allusion to Ezekiel still apply.⁸⁰ But whether or not the peoples of the earth are intended as a referent for the birds in the parable, no separate, second point seems to be made here. The allusion simply reinforces the central thrust of emphasizing the surprising size of the final product in light of the tiny beginnings. At any rate, there is no reason to consider this closing purpose clause as a secondary addition. Nor does it introduce allegory into a nonallegorical passage. The one central governing metaphor, with its initial and final stages reflecting the onset and culmination of God’s kingdom, has already made the passage a brief allegory.⁸²

The fact that the woman “hides” the leaven should not be over-interpreted to mean deliberate concealment of the kingdom. This is just a graphic way of picturing the mixing in of the yeast, according to common baking practice. The variation between the two parables from the man to the woman is appropriate in the culture of the day for the tasks involved and should be given no added significance, except perhaps that Luke liked to balance pairs of parables or stories about men and women (e.g., Lk 15:3–7 and 8–10; 11:5–8 and 18:1–8; or 11:30 and 31). He may be trying to appeal to as wide an audience as possible.

Although the passages do not break the bounds of realism, they at least border on the extravagant. Mustard trees do not usually grow large enough to entice many birds to nest in them, and the “three measures of flour” which the woman leavens have been variously estimated as equalling a quantity of 25–40 liters, capable of feeding over 100 people. There is no promise here that the kingdom will come in such grandeur that Jesus’ followers will dominate the earth. But it does appear that the end result will be far greater than what anyone observing Jesus and his band of disciples would have imagined. The remarkable quantity of leaven and surprising size of the mustard plant point to the second level of interpretation, but the parables do not thereby become inauthentic. And, although the number of measures of flour has provided plentiful grist for the mill of allegorizers, it almost certainly has no further significance beyond pointing to this extravagance.

A few commentators have tried to make the yeast retain its typically evil connotations as in earlier Jewish literature as well as elsewhere in Jesus’ teaching (e.g., Mk 8:15 pars.). This can be

overt, as in one dispensationalist view which takes the parable to be teaching the ever-increasing growth of evil until the last days; or covert, as in the view which sees Jesus as parodying the Jewish leaders' attitude toward the makeup of his followers—tax collectors and sinners—the scum of the earth in their eyes.⁸⁸

But immediate context must always take priority over background, and the parallel parable of the mustard seed can hardly be taken in such light. The dispensationalist view, further, rests on a one-sided view of Scripture's teaching about the influence of good and evil in the last days (avoiding the force of, e.g., Mk 13:10 pars.), whereas the approach that sees a kind of parody reads in an overly subtle form of irony not characteristic of Jesus' teaching elsewhere. If there is a difference between the point of the mustard seed and of the leaven, it is more likely along the lines suggested by Carson: the former depicts "extensive growth" and the latter "intensive transformation." Yet in light of the minimal role afforded to the process of growth in these parables, even this distinction seems dubious.

The Pharisee and the Publican

Scripture: *Luke 18:9-14*

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others: 10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.' 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Meditation: What did Jesus wish to tell his hearers in the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector? Luke gives us a hint: Jesus warns us about the danger of despising others. Contempt is more than being mean-minded. It springs from the assumption that one is qualified to sit in the seat of judgment and to ascertain who is good and just. Jesus' story caused offense for those who regarded "tax collectors" as unworthy of God's grace and favor. How could Jesus put down a "religious leader" and raise up a "public sinner"? Jesus' parable speaks about the nature of prayer and our relationship with God. It does this by contrasting two very different attitudes towards prayer. The Pharisee, who represented those who take pride in their religious practices, exalted himself at the expense of others. Absorbed with his own sense of "self-satisfaction" and "self-congratulation" he mainly prayed with himself. His prayer consisted of prideful boasts of what he did and of disdain for those he despised. The Pharisee tried to *justify* himself; but only God can justify. The tax collector, who represented those despised by religious people, humbled himself before God and begged for mercy. His prayer was heard by God because he had remorse for his sins. He sought God with humility rather than with pride. This parable presents both an opportunity and a warning. Pride leads to illusion and self-deception. Humility helps us to see ourselves as we really are and it inclines us to God's grace and mercy. God dwells with the humble of heart who recognize their own sinfulness and who acknowledge God's mercy and saving grace. *I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and humble spirit (Isaiah 57:15)*. God cannot hear us if we despise others. Do you humbly seek God's mercy and do you show mercy to others, especially those you find difficult to love and to forgive?

"Lord, may your love control my thoughts and actions that I may do what is pleasing to you. Show me where I lack charity, mercy, and forgiveness toward my neighbor. And help me to be generous in giving to others what you have so generously given to me."

The Two Builders

Scripture: *Matthew 7:21-29*

21 "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.' 24 "Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; 25 and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. 26 And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; 27 and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it." 28 And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, 29 for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Meditation: When Jesus told the story of the builders he likely had the following proverb in mind: *When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm for ever* (Proverbs 10:25). What's the significance of the story for us? The kind of foundation we build our lives upon will determine whether we can survive the storms that are sure to come. Builders usually lay their foundations when the weather and soil conditions are at their best. It takes foresight to know how a foundation will stand up against adverse conditions. Building a house on a flood plain, such as a dry river-bed, is a sure bet for disaster! Jesus prefaced his story with a warning: We may fool humans with our speech, but God cannot be deceived. He sees the heart as it truly is — with its motives, intentions, desires, and choices (Psalm 139:2). There is only one way in which a person's sincerity can be proved, and that is by one's practice. Fine words can never replace good deeds. Our character is revealed in the choices we make, especially when we are tested. Do you cheat on an exam or on your income taxes, especially when it will cost you? Do you lie, or cover-up, when disclosing the truth will cause you injury or embarrassment? A true person is honest and reliable before God, himself, and his neighbor. His word can be counted on. What foundation is your life built upon?

"Lord, you are the sure foundation upon which we can build our lives and live securely. Give me wisdom and strength to live according to your truth and to reject every false and erroneous way. May I be a *doer of your word* and not a hearer only."