Lord Jesus, we love You. Give us a deeper passion to know You and love You more. Give us a hunger and thirst for Your Word as we strive to become better followers of Christ. Amen.

“If you want to know God, you have to know Him yourself. No one else can do it for you. „You can only know Him through the written word He has left for you (the Bible) and through prayer.” David Wertz, Advent Devotional 2011, Dec. 8


Jan. 8 Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8)
Jan. 15 Parable of a Friend At Midnight (Luke 11:5-13)
Jan. 22 Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:3-7)
Parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)
Jan. 29 Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:9-32)
Feb. 5 Parable of the Two Debtors (Luke 7:36-50)
March 4 Parable of The Obedient Servant (Luke 17:7-10)
April 1 Parable of The Camel and The Needle (Luke 18:18-30)
April 8 Easter Sunday – No Class

Schedule is subject to change.

March 11 Pilate, the Tower, and the Fig Tree (Luke 13:1-9)
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Before We Begin

Koinonia
The importance of community or “Koinonia” must be understood in order to put many of Jesus’ parables in perspective. For the Jew in Jesus’s time and continuing throughout the Middle East today, there is concept of community, the importance of community, and the individual person’s membership and role within the community. This importance is so strong it affects their culture, their values, and their decision making process.

In Jesus’ time, most people lived in small village communities ranging from several hundred to one or two thousand. There were a few larger cities, but most of the population lived in small rural communities. Cities were considered a place of evil, corruption, and temptation; a place which can be harmful to devout Jews and their families. The optimal place to live was on the farm or in a rural village community.

The village community became part of the extended family. They worked together, they played together, they ate together, they worshipped together, they celebrated together, they fought together, and they died together. Middle Easterners aggressively pursue to maintain their membership and status within the village community just as Americans aggressively pursue to maintain their individuality. If any one person in the community was insulted, the entire community was insulted. If any one person brought shame on themselves, they brought shame on the entire community. If you show kindness to a member of the community, you are showing kindness to the entire community.

The idea of Koinonia is more than a community that lives and shares their lives together. It was also a community of faith, united by a set of common beliefs, a people set apart by God for the purposes of God, a people who worshipped the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Perhaps more than anything else, it is this community living and breathing as a community of faith that bonded the village community with incredibly strong bonds of relationship, bonding, and membership.

To build Koinonia and relationships within the village community, to preserve their culture, and to continue the oral tradition of teaching, the male adults would gather each evening for storytelling. This is a practice that continues today in the smaller villages. Children and wives may attend but usually observe at a distance. The older male children, who have gone through bar mitzvah, were allowed to sit with the adult men, to listen and ask questions.

Each person in the village was a member and contributed to the village family. Even discipline occurs within the community family. A person’s position and membership of the family is crucial. The ancient Jew and the Middle Easterner aggressively pursue to maintain their membership, status, and position within the village community family just as Americans aggressively pursue their independence as individuals.

Open-Ended Parables
Open-ended parables are parables without an ending. They are left unended intentionally. The Parable of the Unjust Steward is an open ended parable. It does not give us an ending. We don’t know what actions the master finally takes. We don’t know what becomes of the unjust steward. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is another example of an open-ended parable. We don’t know if the younger son learned
his lesson and decides to reunite with the family, nor do we know whether the older brother forgives the younger brother and joins the party.

Open-ended parables are a commonly used rabbinic teaching technique. They are designed to provide insight and provoke thought. The open-ended parable does not want to draw a conclusion about what actions the listener/reader should take. It is more important for the audience to go through the process of internal reflection, thought, and consideration of what action should be taken rather than give a canned answer of how we should respond. Life doesn’t have canned answers. There is often no one right answer in how we should respond. Open-ended parables leave it to the audience to make their own ending to the parable.

Understanding parables, especially open-ended parables, the context of what was presented, the setting, the culture, etc. is paramount is essential to continue the process of internal reflection and consider what actions we should take as Christ followers.

Double Parables
Double parables are two parables in one. The double parable contains two distinct stories, but are combined together to enhance the meaning and interpretation of what is being taught. Both parables within the double parable stand on their own merit and can be told independently but contribute more when told collectively. The Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin is a double parable and is used to introduce the Parable of the Prodigal Son which is another double parable about a father with two sons.

Less To More or How Much More?
One of the rabbinic teaching techniques is to make illustrations from less to more or rephrased, “How much more?” We see this in The Parable of A Friend At Midnight and in the wisdom scriptures that follow it.

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?” (Luke 11:13)

Asking Questions
Asking questions to the rabbi and having the rabbi respond with a question of his own was a common teaching technique. The rabbi challenges the student to think through his question to the answer. The asking of questions is not a sign of disrespect. On the contrary, the rabbi relishes receiving questions from his students. To not receive questions is an indictment upon the rabbi as a teacher and upon the disciples as a students. The process of arriving at the answer is much more important than giving the answer. Examples of asking questions are the lawyer and the young ruler both asking Jesus the same question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answers their question with a question of His own.

Discussion Questions
1. How would you describe Koinonia at MLC?
2. How do you see your role at part of MLC’s community?
3. How vital are you as a member of the MLC community?

4. What can we do to enhance MLC Koinonia?

5. How important is the process of arriving at the answer on your own?

6. Is questioning Jesus or His teaching healthy?
Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8)

The Text
Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and this manager was reported to him as squandering his possessions. And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.'

The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. 'I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the management people will welcome me into their homes.'

And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'

And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light."

Background
In Luke 16: 1-8, we have the most problematic parable told in the gospels, the Parable of the Unjust Steward. It is problematic because the master in the parable is treated dishonestly by one of his employees; however, because of the steward's actions, the master actually praises the steward.

The problem is not in the telling of the parable, but in the reading or listening of it, especially by Westerners. We tend to focus on the dishonesty of the steward and miss the real message of the parable, a message of God's mercy and our utter dependence upon His grace for salvation.

We begin with the master. We can infer from the parable that the master is wealthy. He has sufficient means to hire a steward. He loans money to people. He is most likely a landlord and has tenants who lease or rent land for farming. Payment may come in form of money or product.

The steward is the master's business manager. He is more than an accountant or a bookkeeper. He conducts the business affairs for the master. He negotiates lease contracts, acquires assets, purchase and sells livestock, purchases and hires slaves, etc.

Someone snitches on the steward who has acted dishonestly towards his master. There is no indication that he has acted dishonestly towards others in the community nor is there any indication that others in the community are aware of his dishonesty.

What is not told in the parable is just as important as what is told. When the master confronts the steward, he does not beat the steward. He does not jail him. He does not even scold him. He simply dismisses his services and asks for the accounting books.

At this point the steward has a glimpse of his master's mercy upon which he will later prevail upon if he is to survive.
The unjust steward has acted dishonestly towards his master and towards others. The unjust steward represents us, as sinners, who have done the same thing. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Upon dismissal, the steward ponders what he will do to survive. He rules out manual labor. He makes his living with his brain instead of his brawn. The issue is more than having a job. It is maintaining his relationship within his village community. Middle Easterners are just as concerned about their relationship within the village community as Americans are concerned about our individuality. Just as we aggressively protect our independence, the Middle Easterner aggressively protects their relationship within community.

As people of God, it is important for us to see ourselves as belonging to God’s community, the family of God. We are not intended to live independently from each other. We are to live in community which requires much more effort, control of emotions, tolerance, forgiveness, acceptance, etc. Our relationship within God’s community should have eminent prominence within our Christian life.

The above verse does not mean the steward is seeking residence in someone’s homes because of his dismissal or that they would render temporary shelter and hospitality. He is seeking acceptance into their homes as a member of their community, but also in order to continue employment as a steward working from someone else.

In peasant villages, a courthouse or public building did not exist. Business transactions which required community awareness were conducted publicly in the village or at the entrance gate of the city. Witnesses were required for these transactions as we saw when Boaz redeemed Ruth.

Private transactions, such as the rental of land or loans, were conducted within the home of the landlord or the lender. If you remember the moved “The Godfather”, people came to the home of the godfather to conduct business. The same type of thing is happening here. The steward is seeking to maintain a position of respect so that he will be welcomed and able to conduct future business transactions as someone’s steward.

He devises a clever plan. He summons his master’s debtors and asks them to reduce the amount they owe the master. The steward does not change the amount of the debt. That would leave the door open for charges of fraud. Instead, he has the debtors make the change. The debtors are not aware of the steward’s dismissal and believe the master has authorized and approved the reduction of debt. They believe that the steward is acting in good faith on behalf of his master. All of this must occur quickly before discovery takes place.

What do you suppose the debtor’s did? No doubt, they celebrated. They told their family and friends that the steward’s master has forgiven a sizeable part of their debt. They begin to lavish praise on the master. In small villages, news like this spreads like wild fire. Within an hour or less, the entire village begins praising the kindness of the master.

After the steward reduces the debt that his master’s debtors owed, the master has two choices. He can either call in his debtors to explain the situation and cancel the reduction of debt. To do so, would turn their joy into anger towards the master, diminish the master’s role within the community, and would even bring shame to the master because he did not prevent this from happening.

Or the master can decide to go along with the steward’s plan. The master can eat the cost. It would be better to suffer the loss than to suffer His position within the community. As an unended parable, we don’t know what his decision is. We do know the master praises the unrighteous steward because of his actions. The steward understands that his only hope to survive is to trust on his master’s mercy.
This is not salvation by any work or effort the steward has done. The master can still choose to beat and imprison the steward. The steward’s salvation is completely dependent upon the grace of the master. The steward’s position within the community, his means of livelihood, his salvation, everything is dependent upon his master’s grace.

Like the unjust steward, we have a tendency to make a mess of things. We screw up. We act dishonestly towards God and others. In the end, all we can do is trust in the mercy of God to save us.

Like the Parable of the Prodigal Story, this parable ends without a conclusion. We don’t know what happened to the prodigal son, nor do we know what came of his brother. Did he join the party? Did he forgive his brother? Did the prodigal son learn his lesson?

We don’t know what became of the unjust steward. Leaving such parables incomplete is intentional and beneficial. We do not want to formulate how one should respond or react. The intent of open-ended parables is to provide insight and invoke thought in order to prompt the listener/reader to consider what actions they must take.

The abrupt conclusion in the earlier manuscripts of Mark leaves the women frightened at the empty tomb. The manuscripts did not indicate what actions the women will take. The purpose is to invoke a response from the reader. What action would you take in such a situation?

Therein, we are drawn into the Parable of the Unjust Steward. Having received God’s mercy, what action will we take, or, if we have not yet appealed to God’s mercy, will we do so now?

What actions will we take to live in Christian community?

What actions can we take to solicit praise for God?

How can we mend the wrongs we have done?

How deep and significant is our awareness and dependence upon God’s grace for our salvation?

**Theological Motifs of the Parable**

- God is our Master and is a God of judgment and mercy.
- Because of his evil, the steward is caught in the crisis of the coming kingdom of God.
- Excuses will avail the steward nothing.
- The stewards and our only option is complete trust and dependency upon the mercy of the Master who is willing to pay the price for the steward’s and our salvation.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Are we dependent upon the grace of God for our salvation or are we working on our own plan of salvation with the hopes that the Master will approve?
2. Is there anything we can do to force God’s hand in saving us?
3. How grateful are we for our Master’s grace?
4. How honest are we in our stewardship?
5. Are we good managers of the things God has entrusted us with?
6. How do I see my role in the greater community as God’s steward?
**Parable of a Friend At Midnight (Luke 11:5-13)**

**The Text**
Then He said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and from inside he answers and says, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. "For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened.

Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" (Luke 11:5-13)

**Background**
This parable is another problematic parable. The neighbor, who is symbolic of God, must be awakened in order to grant the request for bread. The neighbor and his children are fast asleep, the door is locked, and it is late at night. He can’t be bothered; yet he grants his friend’s request, not out of friendship, but to prevent embarrassment or shame upon himself. This is definitely not our idea of who God is, nor is it what the parable is attempting to communicate.

The subject matter is prayer. The preceding verses begin with the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus now instructs His disciple how to pray through illustration. He presents the following scenario to them.

Can any of you imagine going to a neighbor, even at midnight, and asking for bread because a dear friend of yours has arrived unexpectedly and you need to prepare a meal for him, only to be offered silly excuses why this request cannot be granted? To the Middle Easterner, the answer is a resound “No! We cannot imagine such a thing!”

Then, just as this neighbor granted this request, how much more can you bring your requests to your Father in heaven who loves you.

Understanding the cultural setting is important in understanding the significance of this parable. The Middle Easterner sees himself as an integral part of the community. When he receives a friend, the community receives the friend. The sharing of food at the table is a sharing of life.

As a host, he must go above and beyond in providing a banquet for his friend. There must not be ample food. There must be an overly abundant supply of food. The host turns to the community, to his neighbors, for help.

In America, we use forks, knives, and spoons to eat with. In Jesus’ time, bread was used. The diner would take a piece of flat hard bread and dip it into a bowl of vegetable or beef spread. He would eat it, bread and all, tear off another piece of bread, and repeat the process.
In the village, the women would know who is baking bread that day. Usually enough bread is baked for a household to last several days or a week. The man would know that which neighbor had bread to spare.

To deny bread is to deny the means to eat the meal. It would have been an insult to the man and to the community to refuse the request; however, this is not the motivation or heart of God.

The request is for three loaves of bread. One would do, but the host must make sure he has more than enough bread for his guest. He cannot risk running out, nor can he offer partial loaves of bread used earlier in the day. To do so would be insulting.

The bread is utilitarian and the most modest portion of the meal. The diner will enjoy the lamb or beef and the vegetables without giving much thought to the bread. When the man asks his friend for bread, he is asking for something that is considered insignificant. It is not the same thing as asking for a leg of lamb or a pot roast or slab of ribs.

We can approach God asking for things that He might consider insignificant. In reality, these may play a larger utilitarian role than we realize. The significance of our request does not matter. We can take insignificant requests to God.

This is one of the critical teachings of this parable. God is not bothered or put off by such requests. He thrives on them. He is anxious to show you how He can meet all of your needs. As you begin to trust God with the little things, you will begin to trust Him with greater things. Eventually, you will learn to trust God in all things. As this process continues, all of your worries will begin to diminish and disappear.

We turn now as to why the neighbor grants his friend’s request. The parable teaches that he does not grant the request because they are friends. The English word persistence is problematic because it is not reflected in the parable. The neighbor does not persistently beat on the door.

It is in the translation of the Greek word which can have several meanings. One of the meanings is shameless or being without shame. This translation seems to best suit this parable. The neighbor grants the request because of his character. He does not want to appear shamed in the community.

God is concerned about how people perceive Him. He refuses to do anything that will bring shame upon Him or His name.

When we approach God in prayer, we can do so with the confidence that God will hear and answer our prayers, for to not answer our prayers would bring shame to who God is. We can approach God with the knowledge that He will not do anything in answering our prayers to bring shame upon Himself. Everything He does brings glory to Himself. When He answers our prayer, our lips will be filled with praise.

Luke follows the Parable of a Friend At Midnight with a wisdom saying and the expressed point of the parable itself. Jesus is using a basic rabbinic teaching principle. It was used in the Parable of the Friend At Midnight and is repeated in the passages following it. The rabbinic teaching method is “from less to more”, or “how much more”.

If your neighbor will grant your request for something insignificant like bread, not because he is your friend, but so that he will not be shamed, how much more will God, who loves you, grant you your request? The intent is not to portray God to be like the neighbor who must be awakened and offers excuses. The intent is to show how much more God loves you and will certainly answer your prayers.

If you ask God for a fish or an egg, He is not going to give you a snake or a scorpion. He is going to give you much more.
When we pray, we can pray with the confidence that God will give us much more than we can dare think or dream or possibly ask.

Jesus has taught us through the Parable of A Friend At Midnight that we can go to God with our petitions and God is more than willing to answer our prayers.

James also taught us that we receive not because we ask not, and, when we do ask, we ask with wrong motives.

The heart of a Christian is not self-focused. It is God focused. The desire of the Christian heart seeks to align with the desires of the Holy Spirit. We desire what God desires.

Desires of the flesh can certainly enter into our prayer life -- desires for wealth, prosperity, health, employment, and the like. We can pray over life decisions. We can pray about what action we should take.

Above our fleshy requests, the heart of the Christian should be that God’s will be done in our lives and that we would live in such a way that would be pleasing to God and bring honor and glory to His name. The desire to do God’s will should override any fleshy request we might have regardless of how good or God pleasing the fleshy request might be. God’s will always comes first.

Lest we forget the significance of Jesus’ teaching; prayers are answered when we seek God and bring our petitions to Him. Everyone who seeks God will find Him. Everyone who asks of God will receive. Everyone who knocks will find God’s door open.

**Theological Motifs of the Parable**

- God, to whom you pray, is a God of integrity. He will not bring shame upon Himself. Furthermore, God loves you and will answer your prayers.
- God does not need to be awakened. He will not make excuses. He will respond.
- If you are confident bringing such a request (for bread) to your neighbor, how much more confident can you be that God will answer your prayers and respond favorably?

**Discussion Questions**

1. Are there insignificant requests that we should not bother God about?
2. Does God always answer prayer?
3. Do you think God wants to appear without shame?
4. How often do we seek the heart of God?
5. Are our prayers more about what we want or more about what God wants?
The Text

Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

So He told them this parable, saying, "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 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!' I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 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!' In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:1-10)

Background

The Parable of The Lost Sheep

In Luke 15, we find three parables, each of which we will examine in turn. The first two are a double parable – The parable of The Lost Sheep and the parable of The Lost Coin and are used to introduce another double parable, The Parable of the Prodigal Son. Both have similarities and both reinforce each other, but in different ways.

In Luke, the Pharisees are troubled because Jesus is receiving and eating with tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors were Jews who were paid by the Romans to collect taxes for Rome. The tax collector could keep any monies collected over the tax for their wages. It I thought that since tax collectors were typically wealthy, that this was the reason for the dislike and grouping of tax collectors with sinners; however, there is more to it. To understand the attitude towards tax collectors, we must understand the animosity felt towards Rome itself.

Israel lived under imperial rule for over 500 years before the Romans came on the scene. First was the Babylonians, followed by the Persians, the Greeks, the Greco-Egyptian Ptolemies, and the Greco-Syrian Seleucids. For 500 years, they lived under imperial rule with only a single revolt. Then entre the Romans and there are 3 major revolts within 3 years. Israel was clearly not happy with the Romans.

It could not be because the Romans were pagans. The predecessors to Roman rule were pagans as well. Israel had to endure Babylonian gods, Persian gods, Greek Gods, Egyptian gods. The gods of Rome were not much different and were not the cause of ill will towards Rome.

It must have been either a) how Rome treated the Jews, b) taxes, or c) a combination of the two. Whatever the reasons, Israel was hostile towards Rome, so hostile that Israel was finally destroyed during the Jewish revolt which lasted from 66 AD through 74 AD. Many groups resisted Rome only to commit suicide rather than surrender to Roman soldiers. When it was over, Jews were banned from Jerusalem and the nation of Israel was no more.

Tax collectors were viewed as collaborators with the Romans, and, as such, were considered traitors of the highest (or lowest) degree. Throw in corruption and overcharging and there it is easy to see why the Pharisees and the common citizens would have issues with tax collectors.
Who were the sinners that the Pharisees opposed? They were not the “not devout” Jews who did not religiously follow Jewish law. Religious leaders preached against this, but did not consider them sinners for doing so. There were lots of “not devout” Jews. The sinners the Pharisees opposed are the same type of sinners that we would have issue with today. They were people whose lifestyle was detrimental and harmful to the community. The sinners were the scum of the earth; the murders, adulterers, thieves, slanderers, prostitutes, and the like. We would have the same issue if our pastor spent his time associating and dining with people such as these and ignoring the religious devout and elect.

The Pharisees take issue with Jesus receiving and eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus received them as company. Those participating in table fellowship were of equal social standing. By eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus is saying, in effect, “These are my equals.” No harm there, except Jesus was also considered a Rabbi, a teacher of the Jewish law. Socially he belonged the religious leaders, but he was associating with people far beneath their social status. Furthermore, by receiving and eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus was sending a clear statement to the Pharisees. “These are your equals too.”

Jesus’ response to the Pharisee’s attitude towards tax collectors and sinners is illustrated by three parables, the first of which is the parable of The Lost Sheep.

Jesus begins with a frontal assault on the Pharisee’s attitude towards people groups like tax collectors and sinners. Jesus clearly identifies the Pharisees as a shepherd.

The idea of a shepherd as a spiritual leader dates back to Moses who was a shepherd and led God’s people out of Egypt. Isaiah continues the theme of God being the Good Shepherd. Psalm 23 says, “The Lord is my shepherd.” By the time Jesus appears on the scene, the shepherd is relegated to a peasant role of tending sheep. They are viewed as dirty, filthy, smelly, and unclean. The Pharisees of Jesus time would not waste time associating with a shepherd whom they held with high disregard and they probably did not appreciate being identified as a shepherd.

Jesus is telling the Pharisees, “You are a shepherd; a dirty, filthy, smelly shepherd. Furthermore, you have lost one of your sheep!”

Jesus is reminding the Pharisees, as religious leaders, as members of the greater community, that they are morally obligated to see everyone as their equal and to seek the one that is lost.

Some might take issue that the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep to find the one that is lost. Are not the 99 just as valuable as just one? How will they be protected? Will they become lost as well?

In the Middle East, a shepherd never tends to a herd of sheep alone. It is always done with two or more shepherds. In leaving the 99, the shepherd does not abandon them, but leaves them in the care of one or more shepherds while he searches for the one lost sheep.

The one lost sheep seems insignificant in comparison to the 99. Jesus’ teaching is that even one lost sheep is significant in God’s eyes.

In this parable, the sheep is not with the flock. It is not in the open pasture. It is lost. The shepherd does not know where the sheep has gone. The search may take hours, even days.

The sheep has done nothing to solicit the search other than by being lost. It does not ask for help. It does not “repent”. It is simply lost.

How many of us know someone who is simply lost? They have no desire for repentance or for a shepherd or for God. They are lost. They may not even realize they are lost.
You may have noticed that the shepherd rejoices twice; once when the sheep is found and again when the shepherd returns home.

The shepherd expresses joy at finding the lost sheep, but the task is not complete. The sheep must be restored to the flock. The burden of restoration belongs to the shepherd.

Lost sheep are frightened. They refuse to move. They must be bodily picked up and carried. Just as there was great effort and sacrifice in searching for the lost, there is greater effort and sacrifice that is made in restoring the lost.

The Church’s role does not end when the lost are found. The Church is burdened with the responsibility of restoring the lost to the flock. This takes on greater significance when we consider restoration of the individual within community of Christ.

The shepherd receives this responsibility with joy. He does not grumble nor complain. He picks up the lost sheep, places it on his shoulders, and begins the trek home.

The second celebration the shepherd has is with his friends and neighbors. If one owns a hundred sheep, they are wealthy enough to hire shepherds. In small peasant villages, a family might own 5 to 15 sheep. They would go in together and have family members tend the flocks. The shepherd is not so much a hireling, as he is one of the extended family. Do you see the theme of community being repeated here?

When one sheep becomes lost, it is a loss for the family. Peasants cannot afford loss. Their livelihood and survival is at stake. The loss of one sheep is a loss for them all. They are all saddened by it.

When the other shepherd(s) returns to the village with the 99 sheep, it becomes apparent that a shepherd is also missing. He has gone to find the lost sheep. There are dangers for the shepherd as well as for the sheep. King David talked about killing a bear when he was a shepherd.

In Middle Eastern villages, men gather nightly to talk about stories and events of the day. Celebrating the return of the lost sheep would be a fitting event for the community. They would all rejoice.

Here we have a shepherd, whom Pharisees considered beneath them socially, celebrating in community with family and friends. This is the type of community that Jesus seeks and desires for us to have.

In the parable of The Lost Sheep, the sheep represents a sinner who repents, but the sheep does not repent. It does not ask for help. It does not ask for forgiveness. It does not attempt to return to the flock on its own.

We suddenly are faced with a paradigm shift of the meaning of repentance. The modern and popular definition of repentance is for one to turn away from sin and evil and turn towards God. It requires action on our part in agreement with heartfelt desire to do and be good.

In this parable, repentance is equated with seeking the lost and restoration. The responsibility does not belong to the sheep. It belongs to the shepherd.

Jesus has clearly placed the responsibility of seeking and restoring the lost upon us, the body of Christ. He calls us to not judge one another. He asks us to make the personal sacrifice and commitment of this great task of seeking and restoring.

Are we up to it?
Joy, discovery, effort, burden, seeking, restoration, repentance, celebration.

Don’t know about you, but this sounds like an exciting church to me!

The Parable of the Lost Coin
In the parable of the Lost Coin, Jesus continues his assault on the Pharisaical attitude that some groups of people are beneath them. In addition to comparing them to a dirty, lowly shepherd, Jesus now compares them to a woman who is at the bottom of a male dominated society.

There are similarities and differences between the parable of The Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin. Both deal with a sense of personal loss and communal loss. It is intensified in the second parable. Instead of one out of a hundred that is lost, it is now one out of 10. The loss is greater and more costly.

The sheep is lost. Its location is not known. In the second parable, the woman knows exactly where the coin is – somewhere in the house. She knows that if she searches diligently enough that the coin can be found.

The burden of restoration is missing in the second parable. Once the coin is found, it is restored.

Jesus is telling the Pharisees that they need to begin searching their own house for the lost. They don’t have to go to the ends of the earth. Furthermore, the responsibility is even greater for it is in their house that the coin was lost. Just as the woman was responsible for losing and finding the lost coin in her own house, the Pharisees are equally responsible for finding the lost.

In the parable of The Lost Sheep and in the parable of The Lost Coin, there is communal celebration which is all together fitting for small peasant villages.

Cash was a rare commodity. Barter was commonly used. Cash was held onto tightly. Coins could also be used as part of jewelry, a headdress, a veil, or a necklace. If it was missing, the appearance and value of the jewelry or necklace would be marred making the item less valuable as a whole. The coin, therefore, is more valuable as part of the collective whole than it is separately.

The parallel cannot be lost or under emphasized. The collective community is more valuable when it has all the “coins”. This does not diminish their importance as an individual, but helps us understand that each of us play a larger role in our Christian community which is greater than ourselves. When any one of us is lost, the entire community suffers. When any one of us is found, the entire community is enhanced and celebrates.

Jesus confronts the Pharisees because they are not seeking the lost either at home or abroad.

Is Jesus challenging us to seek the lost?

We finally focus on the importance of community celebration. Family, friends, and the village community celebrate the safe return of the shepherd and for recovery of the lost sheep. Likewise, the same group of people celebrates with the woman for finding her lost coin.

This sense of community is more than a group of people united by a common identity. These were more than friends and neighbors in a village. They are family. What we are not picking up on is the sense of intense fellowship, intimacy, and communal ties within the community towards each individual, regardless of age, sex, race, or social standing.
I think we have lost this sense of community within the local church. As churches grow larger, they are challenged to foster and strengthen intimacy within the community. The fact that they are growing works against them. The only solution for the large church is to divide itself into small groups or villages. Even then, the task is enormous and very difficult to accomplish.

Since most of us living in large metropolitan areas, we are further challenged with transportation, traffic, and the need to be in several places at the same time. We don't have time for ourselves, much less for each other.

I think there is an answer to be found. There is a way. There must be a way, that we can restore Koinonia to our local church.

**Theological Motifs of the Parable**

- Joy of the shepherd upon finding the lost sheep and the joy of the woman finding the lost coin.
- The joy of the shepherd saddled with the burden of restoring the lost sheep.
- The importance of sharing that joy with the village community.
- The gracious love which seeks the lost. There is not so much joy in the repentance of a sinner as there is in the joy of divine love that seeks the sinner.
- Repentance. In this parable, being found is equated with repentance.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What is the distinction between the lost sheep and the lost coin?
2. Whose responsibility is it to find either (the Pharisees, the Pastor’s, God’s, or mine)?
3. How important is it to share the joy in finding and restoring the lost?
4. Do we need to schedule an event to celebrate this joy? Did the shepherd or the woman put it on the church calendar?
5. How would you describe the joy in heaven when the lost are restored? What are they celebrating?
6. Which is more important – the joy of finding the lost or the joy in the divine love that seeks the lost?
7. Is finding the lost contain an element of risk?
Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:36-50)

The Text
And He said, "A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.

Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.

But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."'

So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.

Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.'

But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.' (Luke 15:11-32)

Background
In Luke 15, Jesus responds to the Pharisees through three illustrations given in the form of parables: the parable of The Lost Sheep, the parable of the Lost Coin, and the parable of The Prodigal Son.

In all three parables, there is a common theme of loss. The loss increases in value as each parable is told – from the loss of a sheep, to the loss of a coin, and now the loss of a son; from the loss of one in a hundred, to one in ten, to one. Clearly Jesus is emphasizing the importance of placing value of human life above what we normally value in life like sheep or coins.
In the first two parables, the characters act normally. The behavior of the shepherd and the woman are expected normal behavior. It is a fitting indictment to the Pharisees to do what is normally expected of them.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus transitions from expected behavior to unexpected behavior. All three characters, the younger son, the older brother, and the father, demonstrate behavior which is both unexpected and inconsistent with the culture, traditions, and customs of their world. Their unexpected behavior challenges the Pharisees to reflect on what is really important and of intrinsic value and reinforces Jesus’ own unexpected behavior in receiving and eating with tax collectors and sinners.

The younger son demands his inheritance from his father. The motive goes beyond wanting wealth. There is a schism, a rift between the father and the son. The younger son wants out. “Give me what is mine. You are dead to me. I am cutting myself off from you and my family.”

Because of the importance of communal relationships, such action also cuts the son off from community. He is saying, in essence, “I am cutting myself off from my family, my village, my Jewish heritage, and my religious beliefs. I want nothing to do with you or any of this.”

In the culture of Jesus’ time and even today in the Middle East, such action is unthinkable. The expected response is for the father to give his son a sound thrashing. When he was through, the villagers would step in and thoroughly chastise the son for what he has done. He has brought shame on the family and on the village community. This behavior would deserve radical and extreme punishment. It would not be tolerated.

There are parents today going through similar situations. Their children not only want their independence, they are cutting ties with their parents, their family, their religious beliefs, and anything else they can blame for ruining their life.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is actually a double parable. In the first parable, it is a younger son, who like the lost sheep, is lost and leaves home. In the second parable, it is the brother who is like the lost coin; at home, lost, and placing more value on what his father can give him than his relationship with his father.

What is conspicuously absent in the first parable is the older brother. We know the father has two sons, but that is all we know. Where is the older brother when all of this is going on?

In the Middle East and in the culture of Jesus’ day, the older brother would have been expected to step in to reconcile the relationship between father and son. It would be his duty as the oldest son to assume this role. He does no such thing. He is having his own issues with the father and wants nothing to do with the brother. In spite of his cultural responsibility as the eldest son, he chooses to remove himself and not get involved.

Our American culture tends to support not getting involved. There is personal risk of injury or litigation. We may know of a situation that is desperate and requires intervention. I am not speaking of people watching someone getting mugged. I am speaking about our apathy in helping family members or friends who are going through extremely difficult times and are contemplating divorce, affairs, leaving home, and the like. Why should we get involved?

The younger son leaves home and goes to a distant country where he squanders his money. It’s party time. There is no indication that he sought or found employment. His lack of regard of managing personal finances eventually catches up with him.
Notice also that there is no indication that the younger son spent the money immorally on prostitutes. This is an accusation raised only by the older brother with the knowledge that, if he could convince the villagers that this was true, then the younger son would be taken outside the village and stoned to death. One less problem to deal with. The older brother has murderous intentions on his heart.

Our family unit is at high risk in America. It is exacerbated with divorce, remarriage, blended families, abandonment, and various social issues such as alcoholism, drug addiction, workaholics, pornography, escapism, and the like.

Building and strengthening family relationships is crucial if we are to survive. In Jesus’ time, several family generations would live together thus forcing the family to deal with relationship issues. Not so in America. Children are free to leave home and seek their fortune. They don’t stay at home. Many times, they don’t even stay in the same city or the same state.

Fostering family relationships has been relegated to Facebook, Skype, twitter, texting, and emails. We are avoiding the very things we need to do to strengthen and enhance family ties.

At first glance, we simply think that the son is starving and finds work so that he can eat. The word for hire actually means to join, to glue, or to stick to. The son attached himself to someone who could help. Ever meet anyone who attaches themselves like glue and you can’t get rid of them?

In the Middle Easter, there is a custom of politely getting rid of someone who has “joined” themselves to you by giving them the worst job imaginable. The citizen of that country was trying to shed himself of the troublesome son and his dependency issues.

The worst job a Jew can have is to take care of pigs which were considered unclean, diseased, and not to be touched.

What stopped the son from eating what the pods the pig ate? Carob pods, in Jesus’ time, were commonly used by people living in poverty. It was a source of protein and substance. They could have their fill and survive. But the son does not get his fill. These were not carob pods. They were most likely a wild carob that can be used as fuel and are disagreeable to the taste and without nourishment. The son could not have had his fill even if he ate what the pods the pigs ate. MIKE

The younger son was in trouble. He was starving to death. Life was not turning out as he planned when he left home. He begins to realize the mistake he made and begins to make plans how to survive.

The younger son devises a plan. Notice there is not a hint of resolving his relationship with his father. By becoming a hired hand, the son can retain his independence and live separately from home, out from under the thumb of his father.

There were three kinds of servants in that day.

1. Bondsmen, who were slaves and considered, to some extent, as an extended part of the family.
2. Slaves of a lower class who were subordinate to bondsmen.
3. Hired servants who are external and detached from the family.

By returning as a hired hand, the young son still intends to remain separated from the family. We are not sure why the younger son thinks his father will go along with this plan. Perhaps it is because it is the only plan he can come up with. Does he expect the father to comply out of duty? Is the younger son anticipating that his father wants to mend the relationship and can, therefore, be manipulated?
Whatever the reason, the son decides to return home. He will be completely dependent upon a favorable response from his father. This decision has high risk. He can expect verbal and physical abuse from his father, his brother, the servants, and the villagers, but he is out of options. Home he must go.

There is a lot happening here. In the peasant villages, nobles did not live isolated from the community. Their home was located within the village. Visions of the father running down a rural farm road with no one else in sight are quite inaccurate. What the father did was plainly visible to the villagers.

We don’t know if the father knew that his son was returning, nor do we know if word had spread to the villagers. We do know the father saw his son from a long way off and ran to meet him. We can expect the villagers to treat the son harshly upon his arrival. It is easy to imagine a gauntlet line. The son would be submitted to jeers and taunts and perhaps severe physical abuse if the father had not interceded.

The father responds in a way that is unexpected and contrary to custom. Middle Eastern nobles never run. It is not dignified. They take slow calculated steps. To run is to lose all dignity and to embarrass themselves.

The father responds out of love. He chooses to run the gauntlet for his son. He runs down the road in sight of the villagers. He uses his own body as a shield to protect his son from the villagers. What a wonderful act of love! Instead of rebuke, the father showers his son with kisses. The father responds with compassion and mercy and forgiveness and grace. I wonder what the villagers thought.

The son rehearsed what he was going to say. We have heard it once already, but now the son does not finish his speech. He stops short. He does not ask his father to hire him. He is caught off guard by the loving act of mercy and the love his father has shown him.

For the first time, the son perhaps realizes his sin against his father and the severed relationship that existed between them. He may have realized that his father could have treated him harshly and sent him on his way. Instead his father embraces him and showers him with kisses.

All the younger son can say is, “I am no longer worthy.” Guilt and brokenness overcome him. He realizes he is a sinner and there is nothing he can do to fix things. The only hope left for him is the love and mercy of the father.

Sometime in our lives, we must reach the point where we realize we are not worthy and that we are powerless to fix things. At some point, all we can do is placing our hope in a loving father.

The father immediately begins the process of restoration. The best robe would be the father’s robe worn at community feasts and gatherings. The robe was a signal to the villagers that his son has been restored to the family. It is an appeal to the villagers to do the same.

The ring was probably a signet ring used to seal wax on confidential papers and documents. Giving the ring was restoring the father’s trust in his son to handle family business matters. (That should make the older brother happy!)

The shoes are a sign that he is a free man and not a servant.

Then we have the fatted calf. This celebration was more than a family celebration. This celebration was a community celebration. A fatted calf is more than one family could eat. The uneaten part would have been wasted. In keeping with the importance of maintaining community relationships, the village is invited to attend and participate in the celebration. As such, the village is invited to participate in the restoration of the son.
We see the redemptive work of the father extended towards the son and also towards the community. The son is not allowed to return as a servant or as a hireling. The father will only receive his son back as a son. The importance of his relationship to his son overrides cultural customs and traditions. It is the relationship that matters regardless of what the son has done.

The loving father acts contrary to what is expected. He demonstrates loves, acceptance, protection, and restoration. The focus is restoration and reconciliation of the individual to bring them back into relationship with the father, the father’s family, and the father’s community.

All of this is done without judgment, condemnation, demand for explanation, etc. All of this is done in spite of the son’s intent to remain apart from the family.

When we say love covers a multitude of sins, we are saying love is more than overlooking or forgiving sins committed against us. The focus of such love is always to restore relationship. The focus of God’s love for you and me is the same.

Sometimes, like the younger son, we feel we must make amends for what we have done or we must make reparations. We commit ourselves to service to repay the debt. We feel obligated to become a hireling for God. We forget that redemption is always based upon the loving action of our Father and never upon what we have done or can do. Being able to accept God’s forgiveness without any obligation on our part is crucial in the life of the Christian.

Jesus isn’t finished with the Pharisees. The first parable focused on how Pharisees, and we, as Christians, should receive and restore lost sinners. Jesus now turns his attention on the older brother.

We have already seen that the older brother refused to fulfill his duties by playing the role of a mediator between the younger son and the father. Something is clearly askew in his own relationship with the father.

We find the older son returning from the fields, whereupon he immediately suspects that something is up. As second in command, he would have been expected to immediately go into the house. As the oldest son, his duty would have been to greet the guests and play the role of host. Usually, the oldest son does not participate in the banquets. They have duties to perform to insure that the needs of the guests are met and that no one is in want.

Instead we find the brother lurking outside asking what is going on. The brother’s refusal to go into the house is an insult to the father and to the community. We can sense already the hardness of his heart.

The oldest son’s refusal to go into the house forces the father to act. The whole village is watching. For the second time in a day, the father leaves the house to speak to a son. As the dialogue unfolds, the son refuses to address his father with a title of customary sign of respect. He immediately protests the actions of the father. He claims favoritism and further implicates the father for not doing the same for him.

When the younger son received his inheritance, the older son would have received his at the same time. The transfer of inheritance is the transfer of title; however, according to custom, neither son would be allowed to sell the property until after the death of the father. An exception must have been made for the younger son, who sold his property and left home.

The older son was not allowed to sell his property; otherwise, he could have taken his own goat and had his own private party. In fact, the brother shows interest in having such a party with his own friends apart
from the family. Like the younger son, he doesn’t want anything to do with the father or the village community.

The desire to be able to sell the inheritance is tantamount to telling the father, “I want you dead too.”

The oldest son refused to show respect by addressing his father with a title. The father does not make the same mistake. He addresses his son with a title of affection. He reminds his son that he has already received the inheritance. There is nothing to be jealous of. No one is going to take the inheritance away. The father then explains the reason for the celebration.

A father had two sons. Both wished the father was dead so that they could receive the inheritance. Both had little regard for relationship within the family and within the community. Both had little regard for respecting their culture and customs. Both were extremely self-centered.

The youngest son chose to leave and try to make it on his own. The older son chose to stay and simply wait for the father to die. As we witness the incredible love of the father, one has to wonder why the sons ever rebelled.

This isn’t just about Pharisees. This is about the human condition which is opposed to God. Rebellion against God is always rooted in self-centeredness. It is that self-centeredness that objects when sinners receive salvation. It is that self-centeredness that refuses to join the party. It is that self-centeredness that insists on trying to do things our way. It is that self-centeredness that separates us from the love of God.

**Theological Motifs of the Parable**

- There are two types of sin presented here; a) the sin of disobedience and leaving the family, and b) the sin of disobedience but staying in the family.
- There are two types of repentance. One if the repentance of a man who thinks he can save himself. The other is the repentance of a man who knows he cannot.
- The nature of God’s grace and His freely offered love and its cost. It is a love that seeks and suffers in order to save.
- The joy in finding and celebrating communally when the lost are restored.
- One son is restored from death and from servanthood. The other son insists on remaining a servant.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Which sin is greater – the younger son who left home or the older son who stayed?
2. What is repentance? Is it the act of seeking and restoring the lost or is it up to the individual to turn and seek God’s grace?
3. Does God suffer today?
4. Do we see ourselves as God’s sons and daughters or as God’s children?
Parable of the Two Debtors (Luke 7:36-50)

The Text
Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner."

And Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he replied, "Say it, Teacher."

"A moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. "When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. So which of them will love him more?"

Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have judged correctly."

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. You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."

Then He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven." Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" And He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:36-50)

Background
Some have proposed that the woman responded to the lack of Simon's hospitality to Jesus. She was offended because of the way Jesus was treated so she avails herself to wash His feet and kiss Him. It would be inappropriate for her to kiss Jesus on the cheek or the hands, but she would do what Simon refused to do.

I think the woman responds because of her previous encounter with Jesus. They have obviously met, probably earlier in the day when Jesus was healing and preaching. Her first encounter with Christ was a life changing event, so much so that she discovers that Jesus is reclining at the table at Simon's house and goes to see if she can see Jesus again.

Middle Eastern homes of wealthy individuals were courtyard homes. The courtyard opened to the street and the doors were often left open so that people could watch and see who is coming to dinner. The doorway into the house from the courtyard was either without doors or the doors left open for the same reason. This was a way the wealthy could impress the common people. It is much like the way people line up to watch celebrities arrive for the Academy Awards. It was not only about trying to impress people,
although that had a lot to do with it. It was to provide an opportunity for people to see powerful, influential, and famous people.

Overcome with emotion, she silently enters the house, sits behind Jesus, and begins to weep. As her tears fall on his feet, she dries them with the only thing she has, her hair. The loosening of her hair was a forbidden public act. It was only to be done in the presence of the husband. It is a sign of affection and intimacy between husband and wife. The perfume she used was in a vial that she wore between her breasts. As a prostitute, she would put perfumed oil on throughout the day for the benefit of her clients. This act of washing, kissing, and drying the feet is an expression of love and gratitude for what Jesus has done for her.

Simon’s disdain for Jesus and for the woman is obvious. Jesus is already unclean because Simon refused to provide water to wash his feet. The washing of feet is particularly important to do prior to eating the meal because of how one reclines at a table. In wealthy homes, couches were provided with a short, small table containing the food. In poorer homes, carpets were placed on the floor. In either case, the diner sits on his side propped up on pillows. His feet is inches away from the table or the blanket/carpet where the food is presented. Given the very unclean and unsanitary conditions of the streets, having unwashed feet at the table was also considered very unclean.

If Simon refused to provide water to wash Jesus feet, there is also a good chance he did not provide water for the ceremonial washing prior to the meal. Without the washing of the feet and the ceremonial washing, one was considered unclean and cannot eat at the table.

The woman was unclean because of her profession. Simon must have been out of his mind for inviting Jesus to come in the first place, but he had to know. “Is Jesus a prophet? Is there a possibility that I misjudged who Jesus is?” or “Who does this guy really think he is? Is Jesus as smart and clever as everyone says? Is there a chance he will say something I can use against him?”

Simon opens the door for Jesus and through it Jesus went. Jesus begins by asking permission to speak. “Simon, I have something to say to you.”

Simon properly addresses Jesus in his reply, “Say it Teacher”.

“Say whatever is on your mind. You’re not going to impress me. You’re not going to persuade me. You may be called a teacher, but you have nothing of value to teach me.”

Ever met anyone who is unteachable? Ever met someone who thinks they know it all? Ever met someone who felt they were superior to you? I wonder how Jesus felt?

Jesus begins with an illustration. The word used for debt is the same word used for sin, so we have a bit of word play going on here. Jesus is teaching that love follows forgiveness. Debts are not forgiven because the debtors first loved the moneylender. It’s the other way around. Via parable, Jesus was indicating that this woman was simply expressing her love because her sins were forgiven.

In the parable, there are two debtors. One owed a lot. The other not so much. The two debtors represent Simon and the woman. At first glance, we believe that it is the woman with the most debt and Simon is the one with the least debt. This would account for the outpour of affection the woman shows Jesus and the lack of respect coming from Simon.

But which one is the greatest debtor (aka sinner?) Is it the one who realizes their sinfulness and their need for repentance or the one who believes they are without sin and does not need forgiveness?
It’s Jesus’ turn now to return Simon’s favor. Jesus criticizes the host for the lack of hospitality. No great crime, no great sin here, but an obvious indication of the character of Simon, a man who loves little.

Notice the show of respect Jesus shows the woman and does not show to Simon. Jesus turns and faces the woman while He speaks to Simon. It is still considered quite rude to not to look at someone while you speak to them. Jesus obviously thought the woman, a sinner, deserved more respect than Simon, the self-righteous Pharisee.

Everything the woman did, whether as an intentional response to the inhospitality shown by Simon or an emotional response because of what Jesus had done for her, countered the lack of hospitality shown by Simon to Jesus. The woman took the place of a servant, sitting at the Master’s feet. She washed the feet, not because of custom or duty, but because of gratitude and affection she held for Jesus.

Later, Jesus would repeat the example she set by washing the feet of His disciples who still didn’t quite get it.

**Theological Motifs of the Parable**

- Forgiveness and salvation is freely offered as an unearned gift of God. It is the woman’s faith that saved her.
- Salvation by faith immediately triggers costly acts of love as expressions of thanks for the grace received.
- Jesus is God’s unique agent through whom forgiveness is announced and to whom a grateful response of love is appropriately expressed. Each person must respond in their own way.
- The offer of forgiveness involves the agent of that forgiveness in a costly demonstration of unexpected love.
- There are two kinds of sin and two kinds of sinners, Simon and the woman. Simon sins within the law, the woman outside the law. The woman realizes she is a sinner. Simon does not.
- Repentance is hardest for those who do not see themselves as sinners.
- In a man’s world and at a banquet for men only, a despised woman is presented as the heroine of faith, repentance, and devotion. The inherent worth of women and the fact they are included in Jesus’ ministry is powerfully reaffirmed.
- When one confronts Jesus, it is done either out of faith or offense. One either takes offense at who Jesus is and what He is doing or He receives the free gift of salvation by faith. Jesus is the stumbling block by which people are both crushed and healed.
- Although Jesus is a friend of tax collectors and sinners, he accepts Simon’s invitation to dine without hesitation. His concern for Simon is equally as strong as his concern for the woman.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Does salvation trigger an immediate response of love and thanksgiving?
2. How costly is salvation for Jesus, as God’s unique agent, and for us, as sinners?
3. How important is it for us to realize we are sinners? How does that affect the way we see ourselves and others?
4. Is repentance available to those who cannot see themselves as sinners?
5. Why did Jesus accept Simon’s invitation to dine?
6. What is our response when we are confronted with sin in our own lives? Do we see it? Do we excuse it? Do we seek repentance?
7. Was the woman’s washing of Jesus feet a precursor of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples?

The Text
As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

And He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father." But He said to him, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God."

Another also said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home." But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:57-62)

Background
We have the first of three short accounts of persons who wanted to follow Jesus. In the first and the last stories, a person volunteers to be a disciple. In the second story, Jesus calls the disciple to follow Him.

The most common interpretation of this first set of three parables is that if someone wanted to be Jesus’ disciples, they must be willing to leave the comforts of home and wander from place to place. Being a disciple requires personal sacrifice and a willingness to go wherever Jesus leads you.

There is a second interpretation that could apply. Jesus referred to Herod as “that fox”. It is possible that others referred to Herod in the same manner. The birds of the air could represent the legions of Roman soldiers. Jesus is, therefore, making a strong statement about who He is and the type of disciple that should follow.

If you are looking to acquire power or if you to join me to overthrow the Romans, I’m not your man. They (the Romans) have made their homes. I have none. Make sure you join me with the right motives.

If you are like me, this passage is especially troubling. Jesus seems to be cold and callous to the man, his grief, and his family. Again, we are seeing through the eyes of American culture.

In the Middle East, the phrase “allow me to go bury my father” is a common term. The oldest son is expected to live with his parents and care for them until they pass. Any indication to leave or to not live up to this obligation results in the phrase, “Will you not stay to bury your father?”

It is not that the man’s father had just died and the man must attend to funeral arrangements. If that was the case, he would have been at home and not with Jesus. The man is concerned about his family obligations to stay home. Once his father was gone, then he would join Jesus.

When Jesus calls us into service, He calls for immediate response. He calls us to put Him above family obligations. His call is demanding, to be sure. It requires personal sacrifice. Being willing to sacrifice family obligations may be the hardest sacrifice to make of all.

Saying good bye, in the Middle East, means asking for permission. Other Arabic translations can read, “let me first go make arrangements at home” or “let me first go and arrange for my possessions at home.” It is an indication that this person must either seek permission or get his life in order before he can follow Jesus.
Jesus clearly indicates that His authority supersedes the authority of parents. We don’t have to ask permission. We are under His authority.

Jesus follows with a wisdom saying about putting the hand to the plow. When plowing, the tiller must have one hand on the plow and the other hand on the reins. To keep the furrows straight, they must focus intently and look straight ahead. If they turn around to look behind them, the furrows are not straight. This is further complicated because fields are plowed 3 times prior to seeding. Each plowing is spaced by several weeks. This is part of preparing the soil to prepare the seed. With each subsequent plowing, the furrows become narrower and closer together. Plowing is a precise operation that requires the full attention.

Jesus is saying that if we are to follow Him, we must be like the tiller. We cannot look back at families, possessions, or anything else that might prevent us from focusing on what Jesus has called us to do. He demands our full attention and our loyalty must be exclusively His.

Theological Motifs of the Parable

- Jesus walks to way of sorrows. Are you willing to walk with Him?
- Would-be disciples sometimes fail to consider the seriousness of following Jesus and the cost of discipleship.
- Jesus does not fulfill his role with power and acclaim but in reject and humiliation.
- Would-be disciples are not accepted until they have made the conscious decision to follow Jesus.
- Jesus accepts no authority higher than His own.
- Cultural demands are not acceptable excuses for not following Jesus.
- The command to follow me is for the present, not the future. Jesus expects an immediate response and action.
- Some people desire to be disciples. Others are called by Jesus to follow Him.
- Loyalty to Jesus supersedes all other loyalties.
- A disciple with divided loyalties is disruptive to kingdom work and cannot participate in it.
- Following Jesus is not following a feel good feeling the glow of an inner light or even an intellectual light. Following Jesus is compared to strenuous, creative, consuming work much like putting a hand on the plow and guiding a team of oxen.
- Service in the kingdom is synonymous with following Jesus. It is not so much about following rules as it is in serving.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean “to follow Jesus?”
2. Is there a personal cost of following Jesus?
3. Who has greater authority – Jesus, or our job, our spouse, our family, our own needs or desires?
4. How does our culture influence us, as His disciples, to follow or not follow Jesus?
5. Where does our loyalty lie? Are we willing to make any sacrifice, including the sacrifice of our lives or the ones we love, to follow Jesus? Is there anything or anyone stopping us from serving Christ?
6. Are we prepared to work hard for Christ?
7. Do you see yourself as a kingdom builder or as a kingdom dweller?
Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

The Text
And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?"

And he answered, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND; AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE."

But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied and said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.'

Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?

And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him."

Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same." (Luke 10:25-37)

Background
We've all heard the story. It is a wonderful story about how a person, who was considered an enemy, befriended another person at his own expense. There is a natural tendency for the reader to ignore the dialogue. To do so reduces the parable to a story about reaching out to others in need. There is much, much more to this parable.

More important than the parable is the dialogue between Jesus and the lawyer. The dialogue is composed of eight speeches given in two rounds of debate. In each round, the lawyer asks a question. Instead of answering the question, Jesus responds with another question. When the lawyer answers Jesus’ question, then Jesus answers the lawyer’s question.

The first question is given here. The lawyer’s motive was to test Jesus. This testing was most likely to test Jesus’ knowledge and understanding of the Jewish law. After all, people called Jesus “teacher”, even “good teacher”. How much did this good teacher know?

The lawyer begins with a question that is basic to human existence. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Volumes of books have been written, answering this profound question. Jesus is able to reduce all philosophy, religious, and theological thought into two sentences. Love God. Love your neighbor as you love yourself.
The answer to what we must do is, quite simply, nothing. What must anyone do to obtain an inheritance? Nothing. It is something that happens by being a child of a father or mother. It is that relationship which allows inheritance to occur. The child does not have to do anything to earn it. No payment is required, although you may have to pay taxes, but that’s another story.

The point is there is nothing you or I have to do to obtain eternal life once we become a child of God.

How do we become a child of God?

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. John 1:12-13

Even our ability to believe is a gift of Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. If we have to do anything, it is simply to ask God to allow us to become His children.

To obtain an inheritance, one must be a child of a father. In Biblical terms, we are not naturally born children, but born of God.

In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. Rom 9:8

Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. Gal 4:28

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children Eph 5:1

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. Php 2:14-16

In Isaiah 60:21, there is reference to “possessing the land forever,” which has been interpreted by rabbis to mean to participate in the age to come (aka eternal life). Rabbi Hillel, an older contemporary of Jesus, said, “who has gained for himself words of Torah has gained for himself the life of the world to come.”

In simple terms, the lawyer may have expected Jesus to respond with "keep the commandments" as Jesus did with the rich, young ruler. More likely, the lawyer may have been expecting a list of laws that must be observed to obtain eternal life. Having received such a list would have opened up the discussion for debate, something the lawyer may have eagerly anticipating.

Jesus has two options. He can go with the Old Testament approach and reply that there is nothing one must do to obtain an inheritance, or Jesus could come up with a list of Jewish laws which must be kept.

Given Jesus’ tendency to break the law, such as healing on Sabbath, the lawyer anticipated a fiery debate with the hopes of trapping and debunking Jesus. This test is more than a test of knowledge. It has diabolical undertones.

"Jesus chose to argue the debate based upon the Law, but He does so by returning the challenge to the lawyer. “How do you read it?”
The asking of questions by both student and teacher was a common rabbinic teaching method. The teacher stood as a student would stand to address his teacher. The lawyer even gives Jesus the title of teacher, thus making Jesus his equal.

But now the tables are turned. Jesus has put the lawyer on the spot. If I was in the lawyer’s place, I’m not sure I would have the answer to the question, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Do you?

The first part of the lawyer’s answer comes from The Shema, found in Det 6:5, but the wording is not the same for how we are to love the Lord, your God. In fact, the wording varies depending upon who wrote it.

- **Det. 6:5 with all your heart, soul, and strength**
- **Matt 22:37 with all your heart, soul, and mind**
- **Mark 12:30 with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength**
- **Luke 10: with all your soul, strength, and mind**

Apparently Jesus placed special emphasis in using our minds to love God.

The lawyer asked the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life.” Jesus responds with an answer on how to live this life. He places special emphasis on loving God by placing that command first. Non-believers certainly have the capacity to love their neighbor without loving God. Many even love sacrificially.

Why did Jesus place special emphasis on loving God first? Are the two connected or are they two separate commands?

Must I love God in order to love my neighbor? To Jesus, loving our neighbor is impossible because it is God who gives all people the capacity to love; however, it is more than that. Our capacity to love, the manner and method of our love, our ability to love the unlovable is enhanced when we love God first. When we love the Lord, our God, first with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, we are able to love our neighbor in ways the world cannot understand.

The lawyer answered well, but he also answered with such an impossible standard that no one could keep it. The Pharisees required complete obedience to inherit eternal life. If the standard is set so high, is inheriting eternal life even possible? Has the lawyer set another trap to test Jesus?

Isn’t loving God and our neighbor another doing something? If all the Law and Prophets hang on these two commandments, then is it possible for us to simply do enough to earn our just reward?

The lawyer unknowingly sided with Jesus by quoting Leviticus 19:18 (love your neighbor) and Det 6:5 (love God). The standards of loving our God and our neighbor are sufficiently high that none of us can inherit eternal life, but Jesus disagrees. “Do this and you will live;” or “do this and you will not die”.

Central to our Christian life is love. When we love God, we have an infinite capacity to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The greatest challenge to the Christian is to center our lives, our being, our essence, our soul in loving.

The lawyer seems to have answered Jesus’ question fairly well. He must have taken pride in his response and to Jesus’ reply, but now the lawyer goes further. His first question had the motive of testing Jesus. His second question is to justify himself as one who kept the commandments he just quoted.
“Who is my neighbor” was an unnecessary question. Rabbis and teachers of the law clearly understood who my neighbor was. It was their fellow Jews. It was confined to those belonging to the Jewish faith. It did not include aliens or Gentiles. In fact, the Pharisees had a more narrowly defined view of who their neighbor was. It included only those within their sect. It certainly did not include Samaritans who did not observe Jewish law and were considered unclean to touch. It did not include Jews who were not devout in following The Law.

The lawyer knew the answer to the question before he even asked it. Jesus knew the answer as well, but He also understood that there was a deeper principle that needs to be addressed. Our neighbor includes not only people who are like us and share the same faith we have. It includes all people, all humanity.

Before Jesus responds with an extremely profound question, He tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan. He needed an illustration to communicate a new teaching not found in Jewish Law.

Jesus begins with a parable with an all too common occurrence. The road descending from Jerusalem to Jericho is a 17 mile treacherous journey where thieves lie in wait. The crusaders built a fort at the halfway point to protect pilgrims. Robbers were particularly a serious threat on the Jericho road. It was well known and the perfect setting for the story.

In the Middle East, there are two ways to identify a person. One way is by their dress. One could quickly tell if they were a Jew, Arabic, Egyptian, Persian, etc. The second way is by hearing the person speak. Their dialect would indicate where they were from just as you can tell someone from Boston as opposed to Texas.

Being stripped of dress and beaten half dead, all identity was stripped from this person. We know not, nor does Jesus tell us, if he is a Jew, Greek, Arabic, Egyptian, Phoenician, Nabataea, Roman, Latin, or Southwest Ashdodian. He was reduced and removed of all his humanity. It was impossible to determine if he was a neighbor. He could have been anyone. He could have been you or me.

Who is my neighbor, indeed?

Priests in Jesus’ day were members of the social elite. They were people with money. The poor walked. The priest probably rode on a donkey or a camel down the road. He has sufficient means to transport the beaten man to a place where he could receive clothing and treatment. The priest could have given him a transportation, but didn’t.

There are several reasons why the priest may have declined to help. Ingrained in Jewish law is to not offer help to sinners. A devout man does not go to the aid of a sinner. To do so was to go against God Himself who detests sinners. The priest was a prisoner of his own theological system.

Additionally, the beaten man may have been a Gentile or dead. In either case, to touch him would have caused the priest to become unclean and unable to perform priestly duties. Priests were not allowed to come within 4 cubits of a dead man without being defiled. The rules of purity, especially for priests, were complicated and would take a full week. The rules of purity are more than simply needing a bath. The rules of purity were a goal to be attained, not the means to attain a goal. Jews strives to become pure as a means to avoid sin.

The Mishnah, the oral Jewish law, required priests to stand with all the unclean at the Eastern gate in front of the altar. They were obliged to stand there to shame them for becoming unclean. It was a public humiliation every priest wanted to avoid.
On the Jericho road, one is able to see a considerable distance most of the way. A traveler’s life depended upon keeping watch down the road for danger. The Levite could have seen the priest slow down, stop, and ride by the beaten man. The Levite was of lower social class than the priest. He was probably walking instead of riding down the road.

The Levite, like the priest, was composed of a list of do’s and don’ts, much like what the lawyer was trying to get out of Jesus. As a lay person, the rules were a bit more relaxed than they were for the priest. He could not touch a corpse, but he could come within 4 cubits. He could have stopped and rendered first aid. If the man was dead or died on his hands, the rituals for purification were not as strict. The consequences would not have been as serious.

Fear of defilement may have kept the priest away. For the Levite, he probably had a greater fear of robbers. If he stopped to render aid, he could suffer the same fate as the naked, beaten man who lay before him. However, the Levite had seen what the priest had done. The priest would certainly be watching his back. For the Levite, it is the example of the priest that deters him. If the Levite were to stop and provide aide, then he would be publicly criticizing the priest and his interpretation of the Law.

Too many things were against the Levite. He would be opposing the priest. He would be risking his own life. He could be defiled by touching the unconscious man. The risk was too great.

Three people or groups of people came, did something, and left. The robbers came, beat and robbed the man, and left. The priest rode by, stopped to look, and left. The Levite followed on foot, stopped for a moment and left.

We now see the Samaritan coming, doing something, and leaving, but his actions counter each of the three that preceded him. The robbers stole money. The Samaritan gave money. The priest refused to provide transportation. The Samaritan puts him on his own donkey. The Levite could have rendered first aid. The Samaritan bandages his wounds, pouring oil and wine on it.

A Samaritan, a man who certainly was not considered a neighbor to the Jews and especially to the Pharisees, acted neighborly towards the beaten man. It was not by accident Jesus chose this person to be the hero. For the priest and perhaps for the Levite, they would rather die than be helped by a Samaritan.

In his book, Poet and Peasant, Kenneth Bailey admits that in 25 years, he never had the courage to tell a story to the Palestinians about a noble Jew or a story about a noble Turk to the hated Armenians. Jesus is speaking not only to the Pharisee’s deep rooted hatred for the Samaritan’s, but to the audience’s as well. Jesus’ displays amazing courage in telling the parable at all. He is placing his own life at risk and could wind up like the poor, hapless character in his parable. The Samaritan, likewise, risked his life helping someone who might have been a Jew.

The imagery for the Jewish audience is compelling. The binding of wounds is found in the Old Testament where it refers to how God saves His people.

Come, let us return to the Lord for He has torn us, but He will heal us; He has wounded us, but He will bandage us. Hos 6:1

But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. Isa 53:5
The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners; Isa 61:1

I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment. Eze 34:16

This parable is much more than being about a hated person helping someone in need. This parable addresses the very concept and issue of salvation itself. Jesus is using imagery to answer the lawyer's first question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

The Samaritan stops to cleanse and dress the wounds with oil and wine. The oil and wine are more than cleaning agents. They were sacrificial elements used in temple worship. In Hosea 6:6 and Micah 6:7-8, we hear the call for steadfast love and not sacrifice. The sacrificial altar itself is an expression of self-giving love.

When the man awakes, he may well be insulted that a Samaritan has used oil and wine to cleanse his wounds. Oil and wine are forbidden objects coming from a Samaritan. They would not be received in the temple, and the Samaritan would certainly have been turned away and not allowed to enter. Indeed, the Pharisees would have been glad if the man had awakened and rejected the free gift of grace offered by the Samaritan.

The imagery Jesus uses illustrates that the Samaritan is doing more than dressing the man's physical wounds. The Samaritan is dressing the man's spiritual wounds as well. It is an expression of steadfast love towards another person whose identity cannot be determined.

The priest could have provided transportation, but didn't. The Samaritan counters the inaction of the priest by giving the wounded man a ride on his own beast, probably a donkey.

A donkey could easily carry 2 persons, but given the seriousness of the man's wounds, the Samaritan most likely led the donkey while he walked on foot. In Middle Eastern culture, this is not uncommon; however, by leading the donkey, the Samaritan assumes the role as a servant to the wounded man. It shows total disregard for his social status and the social difference between Samaritans and Jews, but also a disregard as a middle-class merchant offering a ride to someone who has no known class since he is naked and unconscious.

On the road to Jericho, there is no evidence of an inn ever existing. Most likely, the Samaritan led the man to an inn in Jericho. The Samaritan runs grave risk bringing the man into such a community where he faces the risk of confrontation with other Jews, but perhaps with the family itself. In the Middle East, any stranger who involves himself in an accident is often considered partially, if not totally, responsible for the accident. After all, why did he stop? It doesn't make much sense to us, but to the Middle Easterner, the Samaritan demonstrates tremendous courage by providing transportation to the inn. This is the final act of self-giving love demonstrated. He is willing to lay down his life to save a man who has been beaten and robbed; a foreshadowing of Jesus and the cross.

The wounded man could have been dropped at the doorstep of the inn, but the Samaritan pays for room and board and promises to pay more if necessary. Jesus carefully constructs the parable to demonstrate yet another act of compassion on behalf of the Samaritan.

The wounded man has no money. He has nothing he can trade or barter for food or clothing. If he cannot pay for the bill, he would be arrested for debt and put into prison. Innkeepers, in the first century, were
unscrupulous fellows. A “woman who keeps an inn” was most likely a prostitute. The wounded man could expect no compassion from the innkeeper. If the Samaritan does not pay the bill, the wounded man would be forced to leave.

The wounded man does so without any expectation of reimbursement. He does not know who the wounded man is. There is no indication he is expecting a reward for his services. His concern is for the health and restoration of the wounded man. He freely demonstrates unexpected, sacrificial love given freely without hesitation and without strings attached.

There is a song that goes, “Freely, freely, you have received. Freely, freely give.” The Good Samaritan demonstrates to all of us how to freely give.

Did you catch that? This isn’t the question the lawyer asked. Jesus has changed the question. Other translations read, “became a neighbor” or “was a neighbor”.

The question is not “Who is my neighbor?” The real question is, “What kind of neighbor are you?”

Through illustration and revision, Jesus has introduced a new concept of theology, culture, and living. Christians would take parable to heart as they begin to take care of the poor, the wounded, and the sick, often at great risk to themselves.

We live in a confrontational world. There is nothing wrong with that. It is important to take a stand. Like the lawyer, we are seeking to justify ourselves as Christians. We want to look good so we give financially to church and charities, but would we stop to render aid at great risk to ourselves? Would we stop to aide a known terrorist? (this is perhaps the closest analogy I can come up with today.)

I believe we are also moving more and more towards a world without love. The concept of being a Good Samaritan may one day be as foreign to us as it was to the Pharisees. It also presents wonderful opportunities to show the world we are Christians by our love.

Two type of sinner are presented in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The first type is the robbers who willfully robbed and beat a traveler on the road. The second type is those who hurt the wounded man by neglect. All three are equally guilty. All three failed to do good.

A failed opportunity to do good becomes evil.

That may sound a bit harsh, but tell that to the man who lay wounded, beaten, and naked on the road to Jericho.

I don’t give to every homeless person I see on the street corner. I’m selective in the charities I give to. I don’t think that is the issue. I don’t think God expects us to become poor in the process of helping the poor.

I do believe this calls our attention to helping those in need, especially those who have been hurt and wounded. This parable calls our attention to heed the homeless, the poor, those in prison, and those who are injured.

May we always remember the question. “How can you be a neighbor to someone in need?”
Theological Motifs of the Parable

- Self-justification is doomed to failure.
- The parable holds up an ethical standard to strive for, one that cannot ever be fully achieved.
- A code book approach or a list of rules is inadequate in being a good neighbor.
- The parable is a sharp attack on racial, social, and religious prejudice.
- Love is more than a feeling. It is something you feel and do.
- The question is not “Who is my neighbor?” The question is “How can I become a neighbor, especially to those who are considered societal and religious outcasts?”
- God’s sovereignty is not bound by church leadership and their religious rules of do’s and don’ts. God is not constrained in who He will choose to be His agent as a good neighbor.
- Two types of sin are presented in the parable. One is a sin of violence towards another person. The other is a sin of neglect. All three, the thieves, the priest, and the Levite, are equally guilty.
- Salvation comes to a wounded man, who does not ask for it, as a costly demonstration of unexpected love.

Discussion Questions

1. What rules do we have to follow, or bind us, or that we try to live by in being a good neighbor?
2. What place does prejudice have in the church?
3. Would we welcome someone with no identity? Would we welcome someone who is clearly a sinner (an adulterer, a murderer, a thief, one who bears false witness, etc)?
4. Does God have any constraints? Are we able to place any on Him? Are we able to place any constraints on ourselves?
5. Are we willing to pay the cost of unexpected love and restoration?

The Text
Someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?"

Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions."

And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 'And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry."' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?'

So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:13-21)

Background
It is an all too common occurrence. There is a dispute about a family inheritance. This man in the crowd did not ask Jesus to mediate the case. Arbitration was not an issue. The man had already determined he had been wronged and he wanted Jesus to make it right. His plan was to use Jesus to get what he wanted.

How easily would you and I respond to a person who was so convinced that they are right that they appeal to Jesus to act on their behalf? How would we respond to a person who is demanding their rights? It takes courage to tell a person that they must reconsider their position, or better yet, that they need a new understanding of themselves and Jesus.

Jesus’ response has the tone of disapproval. The Arabic phrase for man or O Man is ja ragul and usually introduces a complaint against the one who has been addressed. Jesus is clearly not happy with the man and his petition.

There is obviously a broken relationship between the petitioner and his brother. The man wants the relationship finalized and total separation by receiving his portion of the inheritance, but Jesus is not a divider. He is a reconciler. Jesus is not showing indifference in rebuking the petitioner. Instead, Jesus is stating that there is another inheritance to be more concerned about and a greater loss to be had if it is not obtained.

Jesus follows with two wisdom sayings. Wisdom saying number one says, “Be on your guard against every form of greed.” Other translations read, “Be on your guard against every form of covetousness.” To covet is to have an insatiable desire to have or possess something. It is never satisfied. It is always found in want. Even if Jesus grants the man’s request, he will not be happy. There is a deeper rooted problem than the man’s desire for his inheritance.

Wisdom saying number two is, “not even when one has abundance does his life consist of possessions.” One of the problems with covetousness is the need to acquire more. Jesus cautions us that the desire for
material things is insatiable. It can never be satisfied. The abundant life He promises is never found in wealth, prosperity, or acquisition of things.

How does one become rich? We’re not talking about well off. We’re talking about being filthy rich. (Is that an oxymoron?)

To the ancient Jew, there was only one way to become that rich. One acquired huge amounts of wealth at the expense of others, by wickedness, dishonesty, and oppression.

Hear the words of Psalm 49

Even those who trust in their wealth and boast in the abundance of their riches? No man can by any means redeem his brother or give to God a ransom for him-- for the redemption of his soul is costly, and he should cease trying forever-- that he should live on eternally, that he should not undergo decay. For he sees that even wise men die; the stupid and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others. Their inner thought is that their houses are forever and their dwelling places to all generations; They have called their lands after their own names. But man in his pomp will not endure; he is like the beasts that perish. This is the way of those who are foolish, and of those after them who approve their words. Selah. Psa 49:6-13

Do not be afraid when a man becomes rich, When the glory of his house is increased; For when he dies he will carry nothing away; His glory will not descend after him. Psa 49:16-17

In this parable, Jesus does not portray a man who has acquired wealth by taking it from others. Jesus introduces the idea that wealth is a gift, a loan from God, and even our souls or on loan and will one day be called in.

The farmer has a problem. God has blessed him with a bumper crop. He has so many crops, he doesn’t know what to do with it all.

The farmer did the work. He plowed and furrowed the land. He planted seed and weeded the crop, but it was the Lord who produced the harvest. There was nothing the farmer did to cause such a bumper crop other than his normal work.

An essential element of Jesus’ teaching is that the man’s bumper crop is a gift of God, and, that wealth is a gift of God.

How much time do we spend pursuing the gift instead of the giver? How much time do we spend seeking and asking for the blessing instead of seeking the Blesser?

What is greater, the gift or the giver, the blessing or the Blesser?

The farmer comes up with a solution for his problem; however, his solution has no consideration for those who are without. He can only think of how he can retain, hoard, and benefit from what he has received. There is nothing illegal in what he is about to do, but it does have eternal consequences.

Jesus again uses language that is familiar to his audience. To tear down and build up is a familiar theme that can be found in Jeremiah 1:10.

"See, I have appointed you this day over the nations and over the kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."
How sad it is when we cannot see beyond our own needs and desires! How sad it is when we become self-indulgent.

How do we counsel such a person? How do we help someone who is possessed with acquiring more?

Do we need to take inventory of our assets? Are we acquiring wealth in the form of IRAs, tax deferred annuities, etc. so that, when we retire, we can take our ease, eat, drink, and be merry?

Jesus has easily moved from past (what will I do with this bumper crop?) to the present (I will tear down and build up), to the future (so I can relax, eat, drink, and be merry).

What would you do if your bumper crop (aka the lottery) came in?

The rich fool begins speaking, but sadly, he is speaking to no one other than himself. He needs an audience to hear his plan. He needs someone to celebrate with, but there is no one there.

Even worse, he is not simply speaking to himself. He is addressing his soul which means “the whole person”. In his line of thinking, the needs of the whole person can be met by material surpluses and will continue to be met by keeping the surpluses for self.

The rich fool has been blessed with a bumper crop, but has no one to share with. I’m not sure which is sadder – that there is no one to share his blessings with or that he doesn’t want to share his blessings.

Theological Motifs of the Parable

- A naked cry for justice is not heeded by Jesus. He sees much deeper issues at stake than resolving disputes between brothers.
- Jesus refuses to answer for a cry for justice when the answer contributes to finalizing the brokenness of a relationship.
- For Jesus, justice is having a profound concern for the poor and the needy, not in simply getting what is rightfully yours.
- The self-centered cry for justice is a sign of spiritual sickness.
- Material possessions are a gift from God.
- Each life is “on loan” from God. The rich man assumed that he owned both material possessions and his life, not God.
- The person who thinks they can find security in the good life in material things is stupid.
- The abundant life is found storing up treasures for God rather than for self.
- The rich fool’s wealth destroyed his capacity to have and maintain relationships. Worst of all, he does not even realize he has a problem.

Discussion Questions

1. What is justice?
2. Is God just?
3. Does God own any, some, or all of our possessions found both materially and in relationship with others? Can any be taken from us at a moment’s notice?
4. Is our life truly on loan from God?
5. Where can we find security and peace that passes all understanding?
6. What is the good life?
7. How important are relationships with each other?
Pilate, the Tower, and the Fig Tree (Luke 13:1-9)

The Text
Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. And Jesus said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

And He began telling this parable: "A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.'" (Luke 13:1-9)

Background
The parable of the fig tree I preceded with the above verses. Neither event appears in recorded history outside the Bible. It is very possible that another violent event spawned rumors of other events. This is typical, especially when people feel oppressed.

We do not know the motives of the people bringing these reports to Jesus. Was this another test to determine where Jesus stood politically? Was this another attempt to implicate Jesus and destroy His credibility and ministry? We don't know.

The first report is about a political massacre much like we witness today. The second report is about a natural disaster. Blame for the first is put on Pilate. Blame for the second could be placed on God.

When man made or natural disasters strike, we wonder why. We question the nature and character of God. Our own faith I tested. It is interesting that people came to Jesus for the answer.

Jesus lived at a time and place where His countrymen were under the rule of Rome. His countrymen often felt oppressed and persecuted by the Romans. There had already been several small revolts and violent protests against the Roman government.

Oppressed people believe their cause is not only just, but also supported by God. Their suffering is the only suffering that matters. No other cause exists other than to throw off the yoke of oppression.

They expect sympathy and support from Jesus. If He is the Messiah, as He claims to be, then He needs to do something. Jesus’ refusal to be drawn into the political debate took quite a bit of courage. It took even more courage warning them that they will also perish if they do not repent. This is not the words they expected to hear. It is a wonder Jesus was not physically attacked on the spot. Jesus is a man of courage, refusing to waiver from His mission to bring God's kingdom to earth.

Finding a fig tree in Israel is not unusual. They even appear in vineyards. Fig trees bear fruit 10 months of the year, but this particular fig tree was not fruitful.
Unlike wild fig trees, this fig tree, by virtue of being in the vineyard, received special care. It was pruned and fertilized and nurtured. It was given every opportunity to bear fruit, yet it remained fruitless.

Psalm 1 says that a person who delights in God’s law is like a tree planted by streams of water bearing fruit in its season.

The season for the fig tree is ten months. Two months is down time; time spent for rest and replenishing.

Two thoughts here. Are we receptive to the nourishment and care being provided to us so that we can bear fruit? Second, are we in danger of burn out because we are trying to bear fruit out of season?

Note the symbolism here. The man represents God. The vineyard-keeper represents Jesus. The vineyard represents the nation of Israel. The fig tree represents the Pharisees and the religious leaders of the Jewish faith.

This parable is an indictment against the religious establishment. No one is exempt. No one is without excuse. All are in risk of perishing. The fig tree, the religious establishment is not healthy or fruitful.

Jesus does not focus on the grape vines in the vineyard but on a fig tree growing in the vineyard. The vine and the fig tree are often used as symbols of peace. Failure to bear fruit was a symbol of the Jews falling away to worship idols (see Hosea 9). The literary and theological background is familiar to the audience.

The fig tree doesn’t seem to be hurting anyone by not bearing fruit, or does it? It is occupying space. A lot of time, energy, and resources are spent trying to make the fig tree fruitful, but to no avail. The fig tree is sucking the life out of the vineyard. It takes 3 years for the fig tree to bear fruit that can be used. It is now the 7th year, the year of jubilee, the year of celebrating God’s redemption. Time has run out.

In America, trees are cut down. It’s an interesting process watching a tree cutter climb to the top of the tree trimming branches on his way up. Once at the top, he begins to cut off sections of the trunk.

In the Middle East, trees are not cut down. They are dug out with the stump and some of the roots. The ax is not laid against the trunk of the tree. It is laid against the roots of the tree. Trees sometimes grow back from a stump, but if the stump is dug out and removed, there is no chance of it growing back. The tree has been eliminated and removed from the soil. The unfruitfulness of the religious leaders must be dug out. It cannot be allowed to continue.

The parable indicates immediate judgment. The ax is already at the root of the tree. The judgment is harsh and brutal. It is not Jesus who needs to be dug out and put on a tree. It is the religious establishment.

The point of the parable is not to say God is without grace. The point is the high expectations God places on those who are caretakers of His vineyard. He will not tolerate laziness, ignorance, and unfruitfulness. The fruit Jesus seeks is not good works or fascinating church programs or enchanting worship services. The fruit Jesus seeks is disciples.

The vineyard-keeper, aka Jesus, pleads for mercy. He offers a compromise. “Give it one more year. Give me a chance to see what I can do. If it still does not bear fruit, cut it down.”

Jesus interjects a bit of humor here into the parable. The fig tree is symbolic of the scribes and the Pharisees. What they need is a bit more manure. The Greek word is koprion. It literally means dung. The original audience must have had quite a chuckle when they heard the parable. Instead of the chief priests
and the teachers of the law spreading dung, they need to receive it. We call this insulting humor and is used today by many comedians.

The implications of this parable are clear. The chief priests are not fruitful and are sucking the very life out of the vineyard. God demands and expects fruit. Time has run out. Judgment day is at hand. They must be rooted out. It is only by the grace of Christ that any time is extended at all. The voice of judgment is personified by the owner. The voice of mercy is personified by the keeper. The voice of religious leadership is conspicuously silent.

The tension between mercy and judgment reside within the heart of God. He desires to be merciful, but at some point mercy must end. God acts to forgive and renew unfruitful leaders. Such renewal comes from actions only God can do. No fig tree can prune and fertilize itself; however, the fruit tree must respond.

**Theological Motifs of the Parable**

- The spiritual leaders are planted in “God’s vineyard” and are expected to produce fruit for Him. When the leadership is fruitless, it not only falls on its own obedience, but also sterilizes the community around it. God will not tolerate this situation indefinitely.
- Mercy is extended to unfruitful leaders in the form of forgiveness and renewing grace.
- Only in the grace of God is renewal possible. This act is beyond the ability of the leaders who cannot renew themselves.
- God’s offer of mercy must evoke a response from within or renewal will not take place and judgment is inevitable.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Who do we see as the spiritual leaders at MLC? Is it restricted to staff only?
2. How do we see ourselves in God’s vineyard? Are we a fig tree or on the grape vine?
3. How does God view the responsibility of its leaders? Of the followers?
4. How does God spread manure to fertilize the spiritual leaders?
5. What happens if the tree does not respond? What happens if we do not respond?
6. Is response an external response or is it the result of internal change?
Parable of The Great Banquet (Luke 14:15-24)

The Text
When one of those who were reclining at the table with Him heard this, he said to Him, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"

But He said to him, "A man was giving a big dinner, and he invited many; and at the dinner hour he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.'

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first one said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it; please consider me excused.' Another one said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please consider me excused.' Another one said, 'I have married a wife, and for that reason I cannot come.'

And the slave came back and reported this to his master. Then the head of the household became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame.'

And the slave said, 'Master, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel them to come in, so that my house may be filled. 'For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.' (Luke 14:15-24)

Background
The idea of God providing a banquet was well established. Isaiah 25:6-9 reads, The Lord of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, and refined, aged wine. And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, even the veil which is stretched over all nations. He will swallow up death for all time, and the Lord God will wipe tears away from all faces, and He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; for the Lord has spoken. And it will be said in that day, "Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation."

While people swallow food and wine, the Lord swallows death and the covering. He saves and comforts His people. Gentiles are not excluded. This is for all nations, all people.

During the intertestamental period, the Lord’s banquet came to be understood as the Messianic banquet to be held in the end times. Somehow, along the way, the Gentiles lost their invitation. The Great Banquet, by Jesus’ day, was for Jews only.

The king has prepared a wonderful banquet; however, not everyone can come. It is by invitation only. You cannot buy a ticket. You can’t bribe the doorkeeper. You can’t impress the host with who you are or what you have done. You need the golden ticket.

The preceding verses segue to The Parable of the Great Banquet. In Luke 13:29, Jesus tells how people, including Gentiles, will come from all over the world to eat at the Lord’s table; however, some will be left out where there is a weeping and gnashing of teeth. Others will be surprised that the last will be first and the first will be last.
In Luke 14:1, we find Jesus eating with one of the leaders of the Pharisees (gasp!) on the Sabbath. In verse 11, Jesus instructs them to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind and you will be blessed because they do not have the means to repay you. (I wonder how many of them did?) The stage is set for this significant parable and the teachings it presents.

For now, let us meditate on dining with the Lord Jesus. We will be in the presence of our blessed Savior, King of Kings, Creator of the universe, the Lamb of God, the Son of God. Can you imagine what that will be like for you? Can you imagine the joy of table fellowship with our Lord?

The Lord’s Banquet, or the Messianic Banquet, represents salvation. It is for those who love the Lord. Jesus warns that many will be left out where there is a weeping and gnashing of teeth because He does not know them. In Luke 13:26, the people will say, “Didn’t we eat and drink in your presence? Didn’t you teach in our streets?” Sadly, they were left out.

On the table is the finest food, fit for a king. It is a huge feast with an abundance of every delicacy imaginable. There is more than enough.

A Middle Eastern nobleman or king will eat with someone who has equal status. They will not eat with common people. Jesus is clearly breaking with culture. God is inviting commoners, sinners, and tax collectors to eat with Him. God welcomes them and gives them places of honor.

I hope we can grasp the significance of this break in culture. If you’ve been on a cruise, you saw the Captain’s table where select persons are invited to join him for a meal. God’s select people are sinners. He’s not interested in social status, wealth, or accomplishments. He wants those who love Him closest to Him. For God, it’s all about relationship.

You might have noticed two invitations went out. One invitation went out in advance. The second went out when dinner was ready. This is normal in Middle Eastern conservative culture. In fact, people will not come unless they receive a second invitation to make sure that the first one was not sent by mistake.

The first invitation is an RSVP invitation. If you expect to attend, you respond in kind. Based upon the number of people accepting the invitation, the host determines how much food to provide, how many servant are needed, how much wine to purchase.

Once the first invitation has been accepted, the guests are duty bound to appear. The second invitation says, “Come, all is prepared.” The Greek word used in this text means literally, “keep coming!”

There is room at the table. The first invitation has been extended. The hour of the banquet is approaching. All are invited. Keep coming! Come enjoy the food. Come enjoy the fellowship. Come enjoy being with the Lord, Your God. Come! Now is the time to worship! Come! There is a place at the table for you!

The original audience did not expect excuses. It came as quite a shock that those who had accepted the invitation now offered excuses. In fact, the excuses are much more than that. They are downright lies and rejection of, not only the invitation, but of the king.

The first needs to inspect land he just purchased. The acquisition of land in the Middle East is a long drawn out process taking months, sometimes years. Several inspections would have occurred prior to purchase. There was no need for inspection after purchase.

The second must go test five yoke of oxen. Again, such testing would have occurred prior to purchase. It is not reasonable to purchase an ox without knowing whether the ox can do its job.
The third just married. In a village community, two feasts would not have been held at the same time. They would have scheduled around each other. The groom’s marriage feast is in the past. He is already married. He can certainly take several hours to attend the king’s banquet.

Such action is insulting to the host. It is a clear rejection by the guests. Jesus is anticipating the scribes and the Pharisee’s rejection of Him as King of the Jews. As a result, they will find themselves excluded from the banquet.

The first invitation went to the “elect” who initially accepted the invitation, but then refused the second invitation. The king now sends a new invitation to the “non-elect”, to those in the streets of the city, to the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. In the eyes of the devout Jew, these people are cursed because they are sinners or sons or daughters of sinners. These are the very people the Pharisees had issue with Jesus who was receiving and eating with tax collectors and sinners.

The king does not attempt to overcome the objections of the first guests. The king now finds Himself in just that position. Imagine yourself receiving an invitation to eat with the King of England. You would immediately be filled with doubts. Surely the invitation was sent to you by mistake. The King of England was you to dine with him?

When the slaves went to the streets, they faced the same opposition. We face the same opposition when we share the good news of Christ. People will be confused. They will not understand how they can be invited. They will not feel worthy. They will offer silly excuses. It will be up to us to persuade them to come because the invitation is not a mistake. God wants them at His Great Banquet.

A new invitation went to the people found streets of the city. These people represent those of the Jewish faith who were rejected by the Pharisees. There is a new problem. They came and there is still room at the table. Having room at a table that was rejected by the Pharisees cannot happen. All the seats must be taken. The Pharisees must see what they missed.

Now the invitation goes to the highways. The invitation is now extended to the Gentiles. God is not excluding anyone. All are invited to the table. The Messianic Banquet which was once reserved for Jews is not open to Gentiles.

Note the determination in the king’s voice. “None of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.” They won’t get droppings from the table. They will not be able to scavenge the trash heap. Not a morsel will enter their mouth.

How sad it is when people are so caught up with who they are, or in their theology, or in their religion, to believe they are the only ones worthy to receive the invitation. How sad it will be when they are left out. How sad it will be when others are left out because they did not repent!

**Theological Motifs of the Parable**

- Jesus is God’s unique agent inviting all people to come to the Great Banquet.
- The Messianic Banquet, promised in Isaiah 25, in reality is table fellowship with Jesus. Not all of the guests are assembled. They are still coming.
- The excuses people offer are both stupid and insulting.
- The invitation is extended to unworthy who cannot repay the host.
- Grace is viewed as pleading grace, required to overcome objections of those who are not convinced the invitation is genuine.
There is a purpose of mission, of going beyond the streets of the city into the highways and byways of the world.

Those who do not accept the invitation are condemning themselves from the Banquet.

Jesus warns the religious community who feel entitled to be at the banquet that the banquet will go on without them.

Time is running out. At some point, the seats will be filled and the doors will be closed.

Attendance is by invitation only, yet it is up to the guest to respond and come.

Discussion Questions

1. How important is the Messianic Banquet in the life of the believer today?
2. How were the excuses received by the king and why?
3. Is the invitation to attend the banquet sent only to the worthy? Who is invited?
4. In Matthew’s gospel, the story tells of a person who refused to put on the wedding clothes, but tried to sneak into the banquet anyway. In what ways do people try to sneak in to heaven?
5. Is heaven for everybody?
6. How does God try to overcome objections of those who may question the validity and sincerity of the invitation?
7. Is time running out?
The Text
Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'? But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink'? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he?

So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'" (Luke 17:7-10)

Background
If you are like me, there have been times in your life when you have struggled with your faith. Take a moment to remember those times and how God carried you through them.

In verse 5, the apostles asked Jesus something we have all asked Him. “Increase our faith”.

Their request is not such much because they are going through a crisis of faith, but in response to Jesus’ teachings that stumbling blocks will come. Their faith will be tested. Their request is in recognition that, as Jesus’ disciples, they need strong faith.

Where does faith come from? How can it be increased? Can I be a person of strong faith? Can I be a person with incredible faith? Is my faith unshakable? Can it survive the meanest, strongest test?

Jesus often found the faith in His disciples lacking. In verse 6, which precedes this verse, Jesus tells them that if they had faith the size of a mustard seed they could tell a mulberry tree to be uprooted and be planted in the sea and it would obey them.

Is my faith strong enough to move mountains? Is my faith smaller than that of a mustard seed?

As a disciple of Christ, we see ourselves as voluntary servants. Paul likes to use the phrase “bond-servants”. We are bonded to Christ by His blood, by His love for us, and by His grace.

What is the nature of a servant, especially a servant of Christ? Although Jesus said that He came not be served, but to serve; He also said that “You have called me Master and rightly so.” Jesus portrays a master who loves His servants and sets the example of servitude. Through this parable, Jesus is about to teach His disciples another important lesson.

In the West, we assume that only the rich have servants. That image is starting to break as more and more of us hire maids to do housecleaning and landscaping services to take care of our yards. These are our “servants”.

This was true in Jesus’ time as well. Ordinary people had at least one slave. Only the poorest of the poor did not have a servant. This parable is not given to a particular economic class of people; rather, it is given with the assumption that the audience will understand master/slave relationships and how that understanding can also apply to His disciples as servants of Christ.

“Which of you” was a common technique Jesus used in His parables. We can translate it as, “Can you imagine?” We saw this in The Parable of the Friend at Midnight. “Can you imagine going to a neighbor in the middle of night and asking for bread because a friend of yours has arrived unexpectedly?”
Likewise, “Can you imagine that any of you, who have a slave that plows and tends sheep, to tell that slave to come in immediately, sit down, and eat. Will you not say first, “Prepare me something to eat, then you can eat?”

Jesus is not challenging the audience on how a master should treat a slave. Jesus is affirming the natural relationship between master and slave.

The afternoon meal, which we would call lunch, occurs around 3 in the afternoon. The slave has not worked all day long and then expected to come in and prepare a meal. Part of the normal, daily routine for this slave is to come in and prepare a meal for his master.

What does it mean to be a slave or servant in Jesus’ time?

The servant is provided security, safety, shelter, food, and health care. In return for his services, the master is responsible for providing all of this to the servant. As a result, the servant has a sense of loyalty and self-worth. The relationship is more than boss/employee. A relational bond develops of mutual trust, respect, and even love. For the servant, this relationship gives life meaning and purpose. The servant offers obedience, loyalty, and hard work. This response is driven out of relationship, not obligation.

The servant has no will of his own. His will is to do whatever the master asks of him and to do it well and completely. The servant takes pride in his work and enjoys the occasional praise from the master.

In the above passage, the slave does not respond negatively to having to serve the master. He welcomes the opportunity and he is grateful for the provision of the master.

The relationship between the master and servant is strong. The bonds are tight. There is nothing the servant will not do for the master, but the servant is not equal to the master. There is a clear distinct difference in equality in status and position. The master communicates his will to the servant who performs his will in obedience. It is not the servant who determines what tasks he will do, nor does he challenge the master. He doesn’t try to negotiate or worm his way out of it. The servant accepts his responsibility and his role as servant.

Here we have Jesus, who did not see Himself as equal with God, or as equal with scribes and Pharisees. He saw Himself as equal with tax collectors and sinners. In John 15:15, He calls His disciples friends, not servants; yet Jesus is clearly the master and we are not His equal.

Understanding the relationship between master and servant is vital in understanding our relationship with Christ. The heart of the Christian is to be a good servant and not to strive for equality with God. The heart of the Christian is to accept and do God’s will.

Has the slave done anything to merit thanks from the master? No. He has merely done what was asked of him. The servant does not expect special recognition or a banquet in their honor. He doesn’t even look for a pat on the back. His reward comes in his service.

On the flip side, is the master indebted to the servant for doing what was asked of him? Does the master owe special consideration or favor towards the servant?

How many of us strive to find favor with God? How many of us seek to find favor by being obedient or by striving to be “good”? Is finding God’s favor that easy? (or difficult depending upon your point of view).
God’s favor, God’s grace is not a reward for obedience. That was the mistake the Pharisees made. God’s favor is given freely without expectation. It is not given as a reward for anything we have done. It is not given to us as compensation for our services.

How, then, can we expect special dispensation because we have worked so hard for God?

There are several arguments about what the phrase “unworthy slaves” means. The most one that best fits with Middle Eastern culture can read, “We are servants who are not lacking for anything nor are we deserving special recognition. We have only done our duty.”

Slavery is condemned throughout the world today. The Apostle Paul refers to himself as a slave of Christ and the dangers of being a slave to sin.

Although Jesus refers to His disciples as friends, the master/slave relationship fits well to describe our relationship to Christ. The heart of a Christian reveres his relationship as a slave to Christ with a heart that is willing to do the Master’s bidding.

Many books have been written about how we can discover what God’s specific will is for our lives. So much attention is spent on this that there is a tendency to overlook what God has already instructed us to do: Love the Lord Your God with all of who you are and love your neighbor as yourself.

If we commit ourselves to loving God, loving each other, and loving our enemies, I have no doubt that we will one day hear the words coming from the Master, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

Theological Motifs of the Parable
- The believer is a servant/slave. He is expected to obey and to know his place as a servant.
- Grace and salvation is a free gift, not a reward for services rendered.
- The servant of God labors to fulfill a duty. He does not develop a claim on God nor does he expect special favors in return for his service.
- God is the master, yet, at the same time, servanthood is appropriately fulfilled in obedience to God’s unique agent, Jesus, who should be served with diligence and loyalty.

Discussion Questions
1. What does it mean to “know our place” as God’s servant?
2. How does being a servant/slave fit with your image of being a disciple for Christ?
3. Do we serve God expecting a reward or recognition or a pat on the back?
4. Do we expect special favors or treatment because we are Christians?
5. A servant’s heart is to please the master. Can we honestly say that this is also our heart?

The Text
Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, "In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, 'Give me legal protection from my opponent.' For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, 'Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.'

And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:1-8)

Background
As in other parables of Jesus, there is much more than meets the eye in this parable. In the years 175 to 200 BCE, there lived a Jewish scribe called Jesus ben Sirach. Some of his original work, Ecclesiasticus, sometimes referred to as The Proverbs of ben Sirach, are quoted by the Talmud. It was included in early Catholic, eastern Orthodox, and Oriental Orthodox cannons but was excluded by the Protestants.

Much of The Parable of The Persistent Widow comes from this work. Some of it is changed by Jesus. Other parts are ignored.

He will not ignore the supplications of the fatherless, nor the widow when she pours out her story. Do not the tears of the widow run down her cheek as she cries out against him who has caused them to fall? (Ben Sirach 35:15)

This is more than a parable about being persistent in bringing our petitions to God. We will discover the power of prayer in conquering fear; how persistence in prayer is an important part of piety; how God puts aside His anger to hear the prayers of the faithful; that the cry for justice does not make us righteous or holy; and the use of a Jewish woman to illustrate an example of being faithful.

Jesus makes a dramatic turn away the theology of Ben Sirach who states that God will hear you if you serve Him. The appearance of the unjust judge gives a new thrust in Jesus’ parable. The judge does not represent what God is like. Jesus is again using the rabbinic teaching technique, “how much more”. If this widow had her petition granted because of her persistence against an unjust judge, how much more will God, who is just, answer your petitions.

The first verse introduces the parable. It was given as an illustration of what to do so that Jesus’ disciples do not lose heart and grow afraid. This parable appears in Luke 18, just a few verses away from Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Jesus clearly understood the fear the disciples would experience as they watched Jesus dying on a cross and their feelings of abandonment and lost hope in their Messiah.

Fear and losing heart continues with us today. It is a constant companion from the twin towers coming down to losing jobs to a deteriorating economy to crumbling marriages, and the list goes on and on. All of us go through times when it is easy to lose heart. Courage does not come by being summoned from our innermost being. Courage comes by a persistent prayer life.
The first character in the parable is a judge who does not fear God or man. The illustration depicted was an all too common event. Corrupt judges could be found in every city. They have been referred to as “robber-judges”. The Talmud speaks of village judges who are willing to pervert justice for a bit of meat. In Amos 2:6-7 and 5:10-13, the prophet cries out against unjust judges. Bribery was commonly used to have your petitions heard. Add a bit more and the judge will rule in your favor.

This particular judge did not fear God and did not respect people. In other words, this judge felt no shame before God or before man. In a society and a culture where special emphasis is placed on not having shame, we have a character who refuses to accept shame. No amount of scripture reading or preaching or appealing to his humanity or morality will motivate the judge. He acts of his own accord holding himself accountable to no one.

God’s word repeatedly speaks about taking care of the widow. His refusal to hear the woman brings shame, but to no avail. He does not feel shame before man.

Today, we do not want to feel shame or guilt. Instead of receiving it, instead of accepting it, we blame someone else. In many ways, our society, from the widows and orphans to the judges, live without shame.

The second character in this parable is a widow. Widows were often viewed and considered as helpless. The only person more helpless than a widow was an orphan. Women did not have vocational career opportunities in Jesus’ time. Opportunities for employment were limited to cleaning house, doing laundry, or cooking meals. The wages received would not be enough to pay rent; therefore, they were often forced to live in slums.

The widow in this parable does not have the means to bribe the judge. Nor can she appeal to his character as this is a man who does not fear God and has no shame. There is absolutely nothing she can do except persistently cry out to the judge.

There are times when we have felt completely helpless. In spite of our wealth and resources, there is nothing we can do. We have come to the end of our rope. All we can do is cry out, “God, help me!”

In the Middle East, and during Jesus’ time, judges would often sit to hear the petitions of the people. This was not done in an orderly fashion as one would expect. Prisoners would crowd the doors of the jail pleading for the judge to hear their case. Likewise, in civil matters, people would gather and call out to the judge. Each person is trying to outdo the other with the hopes of catching the judge’s attention. It is loud and noise and confusing.

Yet in silence, those with money quietly move to the front, slip some money into the hands of an orderly and waits for the judge to respond. The judge will respond to the bribes before he responds to their voices.

Here is a widow living in a man’s world. Men, not women, appeared in court to petition the judges. Men conducted business affairs and would bring litigation against another person. As men, they must conduct themselves with civility. They cannot afford to offend the judge. They choose their words carefully.

There is an account of three women petitioning a very powerful political figure. They hurled insults at him and harsh words. If they were men, they would have been killed at once, but their ruse worked. They were able to have their petition heard.
The shouting of the widow is from the others. It has to be to get the judges attention. Her words may be harsh and filled with anger. Have you ever been angry with God?

The judge finally relents. He acknowledges that He does not fear God nor respect man. That is not his motivation. His motivation is that this woman is bothering him with her persistence. She is giving him a headache and wearing him out. He is growing weary of her continual petitions.

The language used here literally means the judge is receiving a blow under the eye. The widow is not getting violent. If she did, the judge would have her removed. The widow’s persistence and her shouting is as if someone is giving the judge a black eye.

The judge becomes convinced of one thing. The widow will never give up. Here is a widow living in a man’s world. She is helpless without money or powerful friends. The judge cannot be appealed to out of duty or morality. No one can make the judge feel shame. Yet this woman, this widow, not only receives an audience with the judge, but he grants her petition.

If a woman such as this can get her needs met, how much more will the needs of the pious be able to get their needs met when they bring their petitions to a loving Father? Furthermore, they are not to give up, but continually bring their petitions until they are answered one way or another. When the believer feels challenged to pray, when they are fearful of their future, or if they are fearful of bringing repetitious prayers to an almighty god, they can rest assured that God loves them, will hear their prayers, and will respond.

Is God convinced that you will never give up praying?

In other translations, the phrase “will He delay long over them” reads “He is slow to anger over them” or “He is longsuffering over them.” The word used here, *makrothumia*, has several meanings, one of which is “to put anger far away.” We saw it in David in the cave with a sleeping King Saul. David could have killed Saul, but he put his anger far away and spared his life.

The widow is not righteous. There is no indication that she is or that she is in a position to receive special favor from the judge.

We are sinners, you and I. We have sinned against God. Furthermore, it is for our sins that His son died. We are the reason Jesus died on the cross. God has every right to be angry with us, but God chooses to put his anger far away and hear our prayers. This is a conscious decision. It is not based upon any righteousness of our own, but it is something God has thought and decided about how He will respond.

We can come to God with the confidence that God has put away his anger towards us. We can pray with the knowledge that God is longsuffering towards us. He has decided to respond to sinners with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (sound familiar?). The challenge for us is to emulate the Father.

The unthinkable is about to happen. Jesus is about to be betrayed by one of His closest followers. He will be tried and hung on a tree, dying the shameful death of a common criminal. His trial was a mockery of justice.

How would Jesus’ disciples respond? How would you and I respond?

They could not protest without risking their own lives. Like the widow, they would find themselves helpless, without financial resources or the political wherewithal to prevent Jesus’ death or vindicate those who killed Him. Their cries for justice would fall on deaf ears.
Jesus’ response came in one word. Pray.

When you feel helpless, pray. When you are uncertain about your future, pray. When you feel out of control or unable to change things, pray. When you cannot speak out against injustice, pray. When the world is not as it should be, pray. When corruption rules our land, pray. When people do not fear God or respect men, pray. When the world seems against you, pray. When you lose hope, pray. Pray. Pray. Pray.

And don’t stop praying!

Theological Motifs of the Parable

- Prayer conquers fear.
- Persistent prayer has an important place in our prayer life.
- Our prayers are lifted up to a loving Father, not a capricious judge.
- God puts aside His anger to hear the prayers of the faithful. We do not have to worry about making God angry.
- Our cries for vindication and justice do not make us holy.
- God will accomplish His purposes and vindicate His elect.
- A woman in a man’s world is the example we are to emulate. The status of women is once again elevated by Christ.
- The cry for vindication requires self-examination lest the faithful themselves fail to keep the faith.

Discussion Questions

1. Have there been times in your life when prayer calmed your fears?
2. What is justice?
3. What makes us holy?
4. Do you see God as one who sits in judgment on the world?
5. Do you see God as one who puts aside His anger for us?
6. How is it possible for injustice and our cries for justice to cause us to lose our faith?
7. If God turns away his anger towards us to hear our prayers, and if Jesus was willing to suffer and die on the cross on our behalf, what right do I have to get angry, whine, or complain?
8. Is there freedom and liberty and release to be found by turning aside my anger?
Parable of The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14)

The Text
And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'"

I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14)

Background
A simple parable about prayer, humility, and the proper attitude for prayer; however, the parable is also about how to be justified before God. The parable begins with two men who went up to the temple to pray. When they leave the temple, their order is reversed. The Pharisee arrives first so that everyone can observe his righteousness, but it is the tax collector who leaves first being justified by God.

The Pharisee’s prayer is five sentences long. The tax collector’s only one. Prayers from the heart are usually short.

The Pharisee tries to impress God with his acts of righteousness. The tax collector makes no such attempt. Ironically, it is the humility of our hearts not trying to impress God that impresses Him the most.

Sadly, Jesus felt compelled to tell this a parable. It is a powerful indictment on the Pharisees and anybody else who is trying to impress God.

Other than the smugness of his prayer, there is not much wrong with what the Pharisee prays. He seems to be doing the right things, doesn’t he? He fasts. He tithes. And he does not live like sinners and tax collectors. I haven’t met a Christian yet who desires to live like a sinner. A true Christian seeks righteous living. And the Pharisee thanks God that he does not have that lifestyle. If you ever met someone who has been delivered from sins like adultery, cheating people, being unjust, they are eternally grateful for what God has done for them.

But that’s the rub, isn’t it? It is what God has done. The Pharisee does not recognize the work of God in his life. Everything he has done, he has accomplished without God’s help.

Lest we fall into the same trap of feeling spiritually superior to the Pharisee just as he felt superior to the tax collector, has there not been times when we have tried to be righteous or attain righteousness without God’s help?

The danger for you and I is thinking that we are more righteous than the Pharisee.

This beating of the breast is a common practice in the Middle East. It is done during times of extreme anguish or anger. It is characteristic of women, not men. For men, the beating of the breast is a gesture of extreme sorrow or anguish and very, rarely used.
In a culture where appearance and how one is presented publicly is paramount, we find a tax collector, stripped of any religious or spiritual superiority, beating his breast, and crying out to God for mercy. He knows not who is nearby. He cares not who is watching. His anguish is so deep, he expresses outwardly what he feels inwardly.

The man beats his heart, the source of evil thoughts for out of the heart comes evil thoughts of murder, theft, false accusations, and slander (Mt 15:19). He separates himself from the other worshippers who have gathered to receive the blessing from the priest. He is not worthy of the blessing. He is not worthy to be with the other worshippers. Deep down, he realizes he is not worthy of God’s mercy.

Jesus concludes the parable with a wisdom saying which is the central theme and teaching of the parable.

To be exalted is to be drawn close to God. When we exalt God, we are drawn close to Him. When God exalts us, it has the same effect. The point of the parable is that we are unable to exalt ourselves except in our own eyes.

In the tax collector's humility, God exalts him and draws him close. God does not leave him standing a far off, but draws him into His holy presence, forgiven, and righteous.

In spite of his greatest efforts, the Pharisee was not justified. None of his pious acts produced righteousness, for true righteousness is a gift from God. It is not something we can attain, earn, or merit.

Self-righteousness separates us from others that we do not “see” as being our equals. Even worse, it separates us from God.

Unless your righteousness (which comes from God) surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees (which comes from man), you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Mt 5:20 with editorial comment in parenthesis.

Theological Motifs of the Parable

- Righteousness is a gift of God granted by means of atonement sacrifice to sinners who come to Him to confess their sin and are in full awareness of their own ability to achieve their own righteousness.
- The atonement sacrifice of Jesus is worthless to anyone who assumes self-righteousness.
- A pattern for inappropriate prayer is set forth. Self-congratulation, boasting of pious righteousness and acts of achievement, criticism of others and their righteousness has no place in our prayer life.
- Keeping God’s law does not secure righteousness.
- Self-righteousness distorts the vision. We see the sinfulness in others but fail to see it within us.

Discussion Questions

1. How important is confession in our daily prayer life? In corporate worship?
2. Does God ever tire of hearing our confessions and us not doing anything about it?
3. What is an appropriate pattern or attitude for prayer?
4. Is there anything we can do to secure righteousness?
5. How do we see others?

**The Text**
A ruler questioned Him, saying, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. "You know the commandments, 'DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.'"

And he said, "All these things I have kept from my youth."

When Jesus heard this, He said to him, "One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

But when he had heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.

And Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

They who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?"

But He said, "The things that are impossible with people are possible with God."

Peter said, "Behold, we have left our own homes and followed You."

And He said to them, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life." (Luke 18:18-30)

**Background**
The order of these verses seems to be reversed. The answer is given before the question, or it could be that the rich, young ruler still does not get it. I've been there before, asking the question after first receiving the answer because I still don't get it.

The kingdom of God is received. It comes to you. You don't go to it. Yet, it must still be entered into. How does one received the kingdom of God like a child? And what is the kingdom of God?

The kingdom of God is clearly not this world. If it were, we would already be in it. The world, therefore, is not part of God's kingdom. It is not where He rules. Jesus, Himself, told Pilate that His kingdom is not of this world. If it were, His disciples would defend it.

Where is this place where God rules?

Many say it is a spiritual kingdom. It is more than that. The kingdom of God is our new spirit, the new man or the new self as Paul likes to describe it. When we receive Christ, our old spirit dies and we are reborn
spiritually. This new spirit is where the kingdom of God is located. In other words, the kingdom of God is found in you and me. It is our new spirit God has given us where He rules.

If the kingdom of God is in our own spirits, then what does it mean to have God’s rule? The Bible tells us that one day God will write His rule, His Law, upon our hearts. That day occurs when we receive the kingdom of God.

To be under God’s rule requires total surrender to His rule. When an enemy surrenders to another, they are placing themselves under their rule. They lose their free will. They lose their rights.

Of course I can make decisions that go against God’s rule. I do that, perhaps, every day. But such decisions are now made against my spirit, against my very nature for my nature is now the kingdom of God and it is His rule, not my own, that I desire.

Total surrender is just that. I totally surrender anything that has to do with self and is self-gratifying. My gratification, my fulfillment in life now comes from the Lord. This is the new source of happiness and joy. Anything else that leads to self-gratification is idolatry.

To receive God’s kingdom like a child is to receive God’s will. A child has no will of its own, but obeys the will of its parents. The child may rebel, but it is only because the child is still struggling about whose rule will prevail, theirs or the parent’s.

To receive God’s kingdom like a child is to completely trust God with their life just as a child completely trust its parents. It may question what the parent does, but the child completely and totally trusts the parents. This is not a conscious decision. It is part of the child’s nature. Because the child completely trusts its parent, the child lives without worry. When we receive God’s kingdom, we are entering a place where we do not have to worry because we completely trust God.

To receive God’s kingdom like a child is to respond to God like a child who runs and eagerly climbs into its parent’s lap where it can find love, acceptance, comfort, security, forgiveness, reassurance, and self-worth. A child is not inhibited in doing so nor is the child inhibited in demonstrating its affection for its father or mother.

To receive God’s kingdom like a child is to receive or accept God’s discipline which is always designed to teach us how to live in His kingdom under His rule.

The rich, young ruler doesn’t get it so he asks the question. He first addresses Jesus with a customary title of respect. “Good teacher”, he calls him. He probably didn’t think twice addressing Jesus in this manner. His understanding of Jesus was limited to seeing Jesus as a rabbi, a teacher.

Calling Jesus good was to address the character of Jesus. It counters the Pharisee’s description of Jesus as the demonic rabbi. The ruler does not see Jesus as evil, but as good, but does he see Jesus as the Messiah?

Sometimes we don’t see God as good. We question His judgment and His rule. We don’t understand why people suffer. We don’t understand tragedy.

Sometimes we question whether a particular rule applies to us and we exempt ourselves from it.

For example, the Bible is very clear about sexual conduct, however, it seems to fly out the window when a man meets another woman. Even “good” Christians find themselves violating God’s rule for self-
gratification. They exempt themselves from God’s rule which they no longer see as good and applicable to them.

Jesus immediately challenges the ruler’s understanding of who He is. In so doing, Jesus is challenging the ruler’s understanding of what good is.

What is good?

Good is the absence of evil and the presence of agape love. Good is always acting on the interest and benefit of others. Good is laying down one’s life for another. Good is dying to self-gratification and selfish desires. Good is picking up our own cross to follow Jesus so that we can be nailed with Him to the cross and die to sin. Good is overcoming temptation. Good is the presence of mercy balanced against justice. Good is following God’s rule.

Who, indeed, is good except God alone? Would we want to serve a God who is less than good?

The second challenge Jesus presents is whether the ruler has been obeying God’s law. Jesus lists the big sins. When the Pharisees refer to tax collectors and sinners, they were referring to people who do not do these things. A sinner is a person who is actively involved trying to destroy God’s rule in their lives and in the community.

The ruler responds by saying that he has been keeping God’s Law. He is not saying that he is perfect or that he has not broken God’s law from time to time, but that, as a rule, he has tried to follow God’s law, but something is still not quite right. Following God’s law is still not getting the ruler into God’s kingdom.

The rich young ruler was most likely a village or city king. Two young kings meet. One has a kingdom in this world. The other has a kingdom in God’s world. One seeks how to transition from this world into God’s world, but does he understand what it means to enter the kingdom of God? Clearly, it does not happen simply by following God’s rules.

The rich young ruler is about to be faced with the most difficult decision of his life.

The ruler’s problem was an unwillingness to surrender his rule for another. This was the challenge Jesus presented. It is more than selling all that the ruler possessed and giving it to the poor. It is giving up his identity, his position, and his status within this world to enter God’s kingdom.

The ruler was asked to give up the very things he cherishes the most: position within the community, status, respect, power, authority, his very identity of who he was. Following Jesus was just as controversial in Jesus’ time as it is in ours. It is just as difficult. It is just as challenging.

It is much easier when we are broken and have reached the end of our rope. It is much easier when we have nowhere else to turn. This rich young ruler was at the top of his game. He had everything one could ask for, but one. God’s kingdom.

What Jesus demanded was too much for the ruler. It required too much sacrifice. It required a change the ruler was not willing to make. You and I are faced with similar challenges every day. Who will rule our hearts?

Jesus follows this event with a short parable. There have been various attempts to soften the language. In Jesus’ time, the wealthy lived in houses with courtyards which opened to the street with a gate that stood twelve feet high and ten feet wide. It was large enough for a fully loaded camel to enter, but required several men to open and shut the doors of the gate. Within the huge door, a smaller door was
made for everyday use. Some thought this was the eye of the needle, but Middle Easterners rebuke this notion. It has never been referenced in this manner before.

The eye of the needle has been referred to as one of the gates in the city walls of Jerusalem, a gate so narrow that it could be thought of as the eye of the needle.

This text is to be taken quite literally. There is a similar saying in the Far East, “It is easier for an elephant to pass through an eye of a needle…” The elephant is the largest land animal in the Far East. The camel is the largest land animal in the Middle East.

Taken literally, it is impossible for an elephant or a camel to pass through an eye of the needle. It is just as impossible for any person, a child or a ruler, to receive and enter the kingdom of God through their own initiative.

Luke is an amazing writer. His literary structure is astounding. His lists and some of his parables begin and end with the most important points. In the center of those lists is a verse central to the theme of the list or parable. I wondered if Luke applied this technique when looking at the parables in Luke as a collective set.

The first parable and the last parable are given as answers to the same question. What must I do to inherit eternal life? The first question was posed by a lawyer, the second by a rich, young ruler.

The answer to this question is given in the parable located centrally or halfway between these two parables – The Parable of The Great Banquet.

Inheriting eternal life (aka entering God’s kingdom) is not based upon knowledge or application of God’s Law, nor is it attained by our wealth, position, and status. Entering God’s kingdom, receiving His righteousness, is done as an invitation by God and is extended to all, His elect first, and then to those in the streets, and then to the highways of the world.

We cannot invite ourselves to the banquet, nor can we try to crash the party, but we can accept the invitation. We have to make the same decision the young ruler had to make. Are we willing to surrender our identity to receive a new identity in Christ?

Just as Luke structured his parables to answer this question, I wondered if Luke did the same with His entire book. Again, I was not disappointed.

The set of Luke’s parables have bookends. On one end is the biographical record of Jesus’ birth. On the other is the biographical account of Jesus death and resurrection. In the middle is The Parable of The Great Banquet, the invitation of God for us to enter into His kingdom.

The mission and purpose of Christ was and is to invite us to the Messianic Banquet.

We are invited to the party. The literal interpretation of the text in extending the invitation is “Keep coming”.

There is room at the table. Keep coming.

Go and look for the lost sheep. Keep coming.

Go and look for the lost coin. Keep coming.

Restore the lost to the family. Keep coming.
Accept the invitation. Keep coming.

Stop making excuses. Keep coming.

Extend the invitation to others. Keep coming.

Keep coming while there is still room at the table.

Theological Motifs of the Parable
- Salvation is beyond human reach. It is possible only with God.
- New obedience does not cancel the old, but builds on it and surpasses it.
- Salvation, entering the kingdom, receiving eternal life, are all part of following Jesus, who is God’s unique agent through whom obedience to God was expressed, demonstrated, and fulfilled.
- The life of faith requires loyalty to Christ and must surpass loyalty to family and property.
- For those who seek rewards will find insurmountable obstacles like the rich young ruler.
- Disciples are assured of rewards in heaven. There is no promise of receiving rewards on earth or from this world. Furthermore, heaven is that spiritual place within us where the kingdom of God exists. It is not so much a place to go to after we die. We can enter into it right now.
- Possessions and wealth can be a major obstacle to salvation and our call to walk in faith.

Discussion Questions
1. Why is it difficult for the rich to enter into the kingdom of heaven?
2. Is there anything you and I need in the form of material possessions?
3. Does God expect us to divest ourselves of all our wealth and give to the poor?
4. Is our material wealth interfering with our ability to walk in faith, trusting God in all situations?
5. How can I walk in faith?
6. What would I be like if I walked completely in faith, trusting God every step of the way?