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VOLUME ONE

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The Parables of  
Jesus in the  
Gospel of  
Matthew

ERIC H.H. CHANG

This priceless collection of expository messages comes from the pulpit ministry of Pastor Eric H. H. Chang in Canada, Asia, and Australia. Parables are meant to conceal the kingdom of God from those who don't have eyes to see, but reveal it to those who have ears to hear and eyes to see heavenly things.

The mystery of the kingdom of God and of the Lord's parables, which are intended to be revealed, are here expounded with razor-sharp thinking, spiritual insight, exegetical skill, and labor of love, in order to build up the church of God.

*The Parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew* elucidates what God requires of a Christian, and demonstrates that it is possible for us to live the Biblical Christian life. It urges every person never to be complacent or indifferent, but to apply the spiritual principles involved with prayerful resolve, and experience God's power to transform us into new people.

## About the Author

Eric H.H. Chang was born in Shanghai, and came to know God in post-liberation China through a series of miracles.

He graduated from the Bible Training Institute (Glasgow), London Bible College, and the University of London (Arts and Divinity, King's College and SOAS). He has done pastoral work in England, Canada, and Hong Kong.

His publications include *The Only True God: A Study of Biblical Monotheism* and *The Only Perfect Man: The Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ*.



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THE PARABLES OF  
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL  
OF MATTHEW



Volume I

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ERIC H.H. CHANG

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## Large Print Edition

This large-print edition is suitable for reading on a tablet or a laptop computer, and has a print book layout (e.g., footnotes are placed at the bottom of pages). Its text is identical to that of the print book (ISBN 979-8628031384) and the Kindle e-book, both available from Amazon.com.

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November 14, 2021



# THE PARABLES OF JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Volume I



ERIC H.H. CHANG

Edited by Winnie W.Y. Yee and Bentley C.F. Chan

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The Parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1  
By Eric H.H. Chang

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## FOREWORD

**P**astor Eric H. H. Chang expounded all of the parables of the Lord Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke, and the larger part of the Gospel of Matthew, in his weekly Sunday preaching in Montreal, Canada, from 1976–1982. He continued in later years to preach some more sermons on the parables, and also finished preaching on the entire Gospel of Matthew. While preaching these exegetical messages, he carried an incredibly heavy load, conducting weekly Bible studies, and discipling teams of people who want to serve God as full-time missionaries, with the Word of God, plus attending to administrative responsibilities in overseeing a number of churches.

The exegesis in the collections of 29 sermons on *The Parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew*, and 29 sermons on *The Parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke* bears witness to Pastor Eric Chang's razor-sharp thinking, spiritual insight, exegetical skill, and sheer diligence. His gifts from God, and labor of love powerfully open up the wisdom and the spiritual principles in the Lord Jesus' teaching, with conviction, clarity and practicality. The following excerpt from one of his sermons can help us to understand him better:

All the things in the Word of God are mystery, and it is a gift of God to you that you understand it. Therefore anyone who boasts in his exceedingly good knowledge of the Bible is not fit to serve God. He has not yet understood that if he understands anything, it is because the Spirit of God has revealed it to him. As people listen to my expositions, some say to me, “We have never heard such expositions.” I say to you, I have nothing whatsoever to be proud of. Nothing! Because if there is anything I have seen, it is because God has revealed it to someone who really is so utterly unworthy. I am not saying a word out of humility but the plain truth. The moment I think that I am clever, the moment I think that I can give an exposition better than someone else, God will say, “I have finished with you. You are of no use to Me anymore because you think you are somebody.” The Word of God is mystery, and it is a gift of God to me that I understand it.

After each solid, Scripturally-based exposition of the Word of God by Pastor Eric, my brain—as surely as everyone’s—would be tiredly stretched from following his careful dissection of the Scriptures. And I recall he said that after preaching and teaching, his brain would throb with exhaustion—“like drums beating in my head,” in his words—from trying to communicate clearly what God had laid on his heart.

Another recollection is that at the start of every preaching and teaching session, Pastor Eric would look rather pale and would speak softly. But as the sermon or training session progressed, his voice would grow stronger with power, and his face would shine brightly. I used to ponder about this shining, then

I realized that it is God's glory resting on him, showing that God is pleased to be with him.

The anointing from God empowered him to communicate so effectively that people who are open can understand what God requires of a Christian, and see that the Biblical Christian life can be lived. Moreover, each listener is faced with the decision of whether to respond to God or not, and understands the consequences that follow. As always, Pastor Eric urges and warns every person never to be complacent or indifferent, but to apply these spiritual principles, by God's grace, in order to experience His power to transform into a new person (2 Cor. 5:17).

I thank our Father and God for bringing Pastor Eric into my life as my pastor, teacher and mentor, so that God could deliver me from the gutter of bondage to self-centeredness, the world (1 John 2:16), and sin, to experience the freedom and the abundance in the new kind of life—spiritual life—that He gives through our Lord Jesus Christ. Pastor Eric's extraordinary life example, preaching, and teaching, have truly made the deepest mark on me, all our coworkers, and many other people. We are privileged to have his life and works of love and faith to always inspire us to strive to imitate our Lord Jesus Christ—to love God, who first loved us, with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength, and therefore, to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mk. 12:30–31; Mt. 22:37–40; Lk. 10:27)—and to endure to the end (Mt. 10:22, 24:13; Mk. 13:13).

May God, Yahweh, mightily use Pastor Eric's toil of love and faith to glorify Him and our Lord Jesus Christ, and to build His

church; and quoting Pastor Eric, “May the Word of God’s mighty and wondrous salvation reach the ends of the earth.”

Winnie Yee (Co-editor)

October 2020

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Pastor Bentley C. F. Chan, for his skilled, competent and experienced contribution in computer expertise to design the interior of this book; compile the Scripture Index; do the legal and administrative work in publishing. He has not only been kind, patient and meticulous, but has also gone to great lengths to advise, to give supportive help. Most essentially, he did the very final editing, and made this book possible.

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Winnie Yee

# INTRODUCTION

Winnie Yee

*“When Jesus had finished saying these words”*

**M**atthew’s Gospel is well known in New Testament studies for its unfolding of Jesus’ teaching in five distinct sections, each closing with the statement patterned on the formula, “When Jesus had finished saying these words”:

Section 1: Jesus’ birth, early years, the beginning of his ministry, and the Sermon on the Mount

Closing Statement: *“When Jesus had finished saying these words”*  
(Mt. 7:28)

Section 2: Jesus’ teachings on the kingdom of God, accompanied by miracles, and instructions to his twelve disciples

Closing Statement: *“When Jesus had finished giving instructions”*  
(Mt. 11:1)

Section 3: Jesus’ teachings on the kingdom of God: discipleship, the will of God, and seven parables

Closing Statement: *“When Jesus had finished these parables”*  
(Mt. 13:53)

Section 4: Jesus' further miracles of compassion, and teachings on life in the kingdom

Closing Statement: "*When Jesus had finished saying these words*"  
(Mt. 19:1)

Section 5: Jesus' teachings on the end times

Closing Statement: "*When Jesus had finished saying all these words*"  
(Mt. 26:1)

Many scholars have compared Matthew's intentional design of the five sections to the five books of Moses, Genesis to Deuteronomy. The five-fold division suggests that Matthew had modeled his book on the structure of the Pentateuch, to show his Jewish readers that just as the five books of the Pentateuch constitute the law of the Old Covenant, these five sections of Jesus' teaching represent the foundation of the New Covenant. This presents Matthew's Gospel as a new Torah, the constitution or law of God; and Jesus as a new and greater Moses, for he is the Messiah whom God had sent. So Matthew had a design and a goal to write under the inspiration of the Spirit of God.

Given this five-fold structure, Pastor Eric Chang's sermons on the Gospel of Matthew are divided into five volumes. When a volume carries a large number of sermons, it will be further divided into sub-volumes.

The Lord Jesus' parables in chapter 13 are grouped with all his other parables in Matthew to form a standalone two-volume work.

The excerpt in the following four pages is from the transcription of an audio recording of one of Pastor Eric Chang's first full-time training sessions. It shows how he uses the statistical method to count particular words, and their sets of cognates in the Greek text, to identify the seven characteristics of the Gospel of Matthew, of which two are relevant to this book: the hiddenness of the kingdom of God, and the parabolic character of the Lord Jesus' teaching. Reading this study will help you see the clear conclusion, that the hiddenness of the kingdom of God is revealed to the spiritual-minded by the parables of the Lord Jesus.

## Excerpt from a Training Session by Pastor Eric Chang

### **The Hiddenness of the Kingdom of God**

*Kryptō* to hide - Matthew 7x, Mark 0x, Luke 3x, John 3x,  
Acts 0x, Paul 2x, New Testament 19x

*Kryptos* hidden - Matthew 5x, Mark 1x, Luke 2x, John 3x,  
Acts 0x, Paul 5x, New Testament 17x

The second characteristic mark of Matthew is the hiddenness of the kingdom of God. It is hidden because we need to have eyes to see it. The word "to hide" (*kryptō*) is more frequent in

Matthew than anywhere else, but this time, instead of just looking at the statistics, let us look at the word itself, how it is used for example in Matthew 11:25.

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children. (ESV)

Here you can see this hiddenness. It is hidden from the world, from the wise and understanding, because it is of a spiritual, a heavenly nature, and what is spiritual is hidden to those who are not spiritual. This is very plain, and is expressed in the parables for example in Matthew 13:10-11, 34-35:

Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.”

All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: “I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.” (ESV)

Here you see the hiddenness of the kingdom, and yet it has to be revealed in parables. Parables by their very nature both hide and reveal at the same time. The kingdom of God hides from those who are carnal, but reveals to those who are spiritual, who have eyes to see heavenly things.

The word “hidden” (*kryptos*) is also more frequent in Matthew than anywhere else in the New Testament, just to impress on your mind the fact that this heavenly kingdom can only be seen by those who have eyes for spiritual things.

The result is that those who are members in the kingdom of God will conduct themselves in a certain way in which there is both a hiding and a revealing as in Matthew 6:4, 6, 18:

“so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

“But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

“... that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (ESV)

Here we see that the Father is also in secret, that is, He is there only for those who have spiritual perception. In this way, the disciple’s conduct is also characterized by a certain hiddenness because of its being spiritual. The spiritual man does not display his alms, he does not pray or fast for other people to regard him as being extra holy. His spirituality is inward, it is deep.

To refresh our minds: the kingdom of God—God’s kingship—is spiritual. And because it is spiritual, it is hidden from the carnal man who cannot see it, yet it is meant to be revealed. It is revealed to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. This expression, “If you have ears to hear, then hear,” is a very

characteristic expression in Matthew. You find it for example in Matthew 11:15, 13:9, 43, and several other times in the New Testament. In this connection, we can look at the passage in Matthew 13:15-16.

For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.

The conclusion of this second characteristic is that the kingdom of God is hidden. It is not that God intends to hide it; it all depends on whether you have eyes to see and ears to hear. And so the disciples are blessed—because the others have neither eyes to see nor ears to hear—as he said, “Blessed are your eyes because you see, blessed are your ears because you hear.”

### **The Parabolic Character of the Lord Jesus' Teaching**

We now come to the third characteristic of Matthew which is related to the second: the parabolic character of the Lord's teaching. This is brought out again by a group of words which are statistically predominant in Matthew—words like *field*, *sow*, *vineyard*, *tree*, and especially *like*. The word *like* would not be significant unless you are using it in the right sense as in, “What shall I liken the kingdom of God to?”—that is, what shall I compare the kingdom of God to? The word *like* in the verb form, *homoioō*—defined as to be like, become like, and

compare—occurs 8x in Matthew, 1x in Mark, 3x in Luke, 0x in John, 1x in Acts, 1x in Paul, 15x in the New Testament. You can see the statistics of the matter: 15 times in the New Testament, of which 8 times are in Matthew, more than half; and only once in Mark, 3 times in Luke. So you see again that this parabolic character is very clear in Matthew's teaching.

I hope by now that you understand the significance of parables. Parables are meant to conceal the message from those who do not have eyes to see, who are carnal, but reveal it to those who have ears to hear and eyes to see. Many still do not understand the nature of parables, which is why Matthew 13:34 says, "All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable." A parable conveys truth, but to understand it requires spiritual insight. You can test the depth of your spiritual insight by studying the parables and seeing how much you understand them. It is often a humbling experience when you realize that you are not as perceptive as you thought you were. I certainly have had many occasions to feel very humbled before the Lord.



## Chapter 1



# TWO TYPES OF FOUNDATION

Matthew 7:21–27

1977

**T**oday we begin our series of messages on the parables of the Lord Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, by looking at a striking and important parable in Matthew 7:21–27:

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.” Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat

on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it. (ESV)

The parallel passage to this is found in Luke 6:46–49:

Why do you call me “Lord, Lord,” and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who **dug deep** and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great. (ESV)

## Valuable differences in parallel passages

Here we have two passages, one in Matthew and one in Luke, that are similar but not identical. In Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels, you will often encounter parallel passages which are similar but not exactly the same. What is the reason for this? One reason is that the Lord Jesus did not, in his ministry, teach these things on only one occasion or at only one place.

If a spiritual lesson is important, we would expect Jesus to preach the same truth in different places to different audiences.

When he preaches the same message at another place, there will be differences in the presentation. In the two parallel passages we quoted, the differences between them are minor. But the differences are quite major at some other places in the Gospels. If you compare the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25 with the Parable of the Minas in Luke 19, you will see lots of similar content, yet also major differences. Matthew is simply recording Jesus' teaching given at one place whereas Luke records the same teaching given at another place.

We thank God for these differences because it is most precious to compare them and see how something said in one Gospel account enriches the meaning of another Gospel account where the detail is absent.

## **Saving faith includes obedience**

In this parable of the two foundations, we see two kinds of faith. One is saving faith. The other is also faith by the popular definition of the word "faith," but it is not saving faith. Think through what the Lord Jesus is teaching, and ask yourself whether your faith is saving faith.

You may prophesy or perform healing or cast out demons, but that doesn't prove that you have saving faith, though it does prove that you have some sort of faith. How important it is for the church today to understand this truth, lest there be many who have the same kind of faith as these people, which is not saving faith!

Jesus will turn to them and say, “I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers” (Mt. 7:23). What exactly is the problem with these people? It isn’t that they lack faith, but that their faith doesn’t include obedience. Jesus says that only those who do the will of the Father will enter the kingdom of heaven (v.21). Saving faith, the only true faith, includes obedience to God who loves us deeply.

## **Non-saving faith**

You may genuinely believe in God and in His Son Jesus Christ. You may believe in God’s power to the extent that you do mighty miracles. Yet it is possible all the same that the life you are living is a life of self will. In your daily life, you simply do what you please and go where you want to go, without consulting God at all. The only time you consult God is when you don’t know which way to turn, so you turn to God in the way an unbeliever would turn to a fortune teller.

Many Christians don’t know which way to go, so they use God to find out. But even in trying to know what God’s will is, they might not necessarily obey it. They are like those who consult a fortune teller not because they want to obey him but to avoid life difficulties. These Christians have faith, but not a faith that functions in obedience.

What kind of faith do you have? You may say, “I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior sent by God. I believe that Jesus, having died for my sins, rose from the dead. I believe that the Bible is the Word of God.” You can believe all this yet not obey

Christ's teaching in your daily life; you have merely accepted these teachings as true. This kind of faith does not involve a living obedience to God, so how can it save you? In Scriptural teaching, merely accepting the orthodox belief of "faith alone"—even if it is a sincere intellectual belief—does not save.

## **The church perpetrated the most heinous crimes**

In the history of the church, many Christians have perpetrated the most disgraceful crimes in God's name despite believing all these doctrines. Do you think that those who perpetrated the Spanish Inquisition, killing many in the name of God, did not believe that the Bible is the Word of God? Do you think they did not believe in God? Do you think they did not believe that Jesus is the Christ sent by God? Do you think they did not believe he died on the cross?

They believed all these things, yet they put people to death while wearing the cross around their own necks!

These are the dark episodes of church history. You can wear a cross around your neck while putting people to death, and think you are doing God a service (cf. John 16:2).

The Roman Catholics were not the only ones guilty of such crimes. The Protestants did some heinous acts too, in the Thirty Years' War. And all these atrocities were done in the name of God! The problem was not that they lacked faith, but that they lacked obedience. Jesus says you must have an obedient faith if you are going to be saved.

## The church is judgmental in God's name

Let's just consider the people in the church today without going back in church history. There are people in the church today who use their tongues like a sword to kill others in God's name. They criticize others in the church to the point of destroying them. You don't have to be in church for long to witness this. Some people have left the church simply because others kept on criticizing them.

Christians with tongues like a sword would often say, "You are a liar, a hypocrite, or whatever. I am criticizing you because I'm doing this in God's service."

It doesn't mean that the church is not allowed to point out faults and mistakes, but that it's not for us Christians to criticize and judge others in this hostile spirit, and then say, "I'm doing it for God."

The Lord Jesus says we are to love and encourage one another. Do you and I obey that teaching? What's the point of saying I believe in Jesus when I don't do what he tells me? When I don't love or care about people, how can I say I have saving faith? My doctrines may be correct, but where is the obedience?

I will never forget what I saw at a meeting of many well-known Christian leaders and writers that was held in Cambridge, England. I happened to be in Cambridge, and I asked if I may listen in on their discussions as I knew their famous names from their books.

That experience really shook me. My heart sank at their attitude and the manner in which they argued over the points being discussed. I am not saying that all of them behaved like

this, but a considerable number did. You probably wouldn't be surprised that I don't want to read their books any more. When I read books, it's important to me what kind of people they are, not how many degrees they have.

But when a godly man has something to say, I listen to him. That is why books by people like John Sung are precious to me. I am sure that he would have excelled in the field of chemistry which was his specialty, but in terms of the Word of God, he had next to no training. So let me be honest about it: John Sung's writings are not worth reading in terms of the academic teaching of God's Word, but his spiritual insight is exceedingly good. He sees things that academics cannot see. That is exactly what makes his writings precious.

So it comes back to this matter of an obedient faith versus a faith that doesn't obey God. This is most essential for us to know, for our salvation depends on it.

## **Christians honor God with their lips**

The Lord Jesus says in Luke 6:46, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?" In your experience, how many times have you said, "Lord, Lord," yet didn't do what Jesus teaches?

In Isaiah 29:13, God says, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Why even bother to honor God with your lips when your heart is far away? Here we see the foolishness of people. We may treat people like this,

honoring them with an aloof heart, but we cannot treat God like that.

In relating with people, we don't want to offend them, so we might say something like, "How are you doing, my friend?" But in our hearts we might say, "The sooner this guy disappears, the better!" We behave like this because it's in our nature, even when we are in church. Let's be honest about it. After the church service, you might smile at people, saying, "How are you doing?" but you don't care to hear the answer.

We may have the courtesy to ask, "Have you had dinner yet?" If the other person says no, we wouldn't reply, "Oh, you haven't eaten! Can I get you something to eat?" We ask questions that outwardly express concern, but in our hearts we are not concerned. We are near with our lips, but our hearts are far away.

An important spiritual principle then emerges: Your relationship with God mirrors your relationship with men. If your heart is far from God, you will be far from men. This principle also operates in reverse: If your heart is far from people, it will also be far from God.

These principles operate constantly in the spiritual life. If you want to learn to draw near to God, learn to draw near to one another. This is the principle that the apostle John teaches in 1 John 4:20: If you don't love your brother whom you see, how can you love God whom you don't see?

## **Faith and love must be built on a sure foundation**

It is easier to love someone we don't see because we don't have to think of his wrongdoings and character imperfections. It's like the people who adore a movie star in their imagination, "Oh, this beautiful or handsome movie star is wonderful!" They see this person in their dreams. Just watch the teenagers go wild when the Beatles or the Rolling Stones come on stage!

But wait till you know that rock star or movie star. At first you thought he or she is so wonderful, but that's because you have made the person wonderful in your imagination. If you get a chance to see that person as he or she really is, I wonder how long your excitement will last. I think that after one week, you will be so disillusioned that you wouldn't want to think about that person again!

This is a common problem in marriage especially if the couple married young. They don't have enough life experience to know the realities of human nature. They fall in love, and think the other person is as wonderful as an angel! They can't eat or sleep without thinking about this person. But a month into their marriage, they start fighting because all along they had been living in their imagination, and now the reality doesn't match up.

So the principle in the spiritual life is that your love and your faith must not be directed towards an imaginary object, but towards God as He truly is. Are you painting a concept of God in your own mind? (On the other hand, it is true that no matter

how wonderful you imagine God to be, God is even more wonderful than that!)

How can we know whether our love and faith towards God is real or imaginary? We will know when it's put to the test of everyday life.

In the church, some Christians are outwardly full of love for God and are filled with the fire of devotion. But a year later, they are no longer found in the church. We would think that a person with this kind of devotion to God must have a wonderful faith. So how did he or she end up like this, falling away from God altogether? I am sure you have known people like that, who have an imaginary faith.

I have known many such people who are outwardly devoted to God. They live only for God and study only for God, but where are they today? They are no longer in church, and no longer walking with God. You may say, "Strange, how could anyone with this kind of devotion go to the other extreme?" Don't be surprised when you see this. It happens all the time.

It is really no different from the situation of a young couple who were deeply in love and got married, yet divorced a few months later. They were holding hands, seeing stars in their eyes, and staggering on the streets as if drunk with wine. How can it be that they are fighting a few months into their marriage? Didn't they genuinely love each other before they got married?

Their love for each other was genuine, but there is a vast difference between a genuine love towards a genuine object,

and a love that may be genuine but is directed towards an imaginary object.

When you fall in love, I hope you will fall in love with your eyes open, and not have a love that is so blind that when your eyes are finally opened, you will say, “What have I been doing? I have been loving with my eyes closed, but now I see the reality!”

There is a vast difference between the two kinds of love. When you become a Christian, don't love God with your eyes closed. God doesn't want this kind of blind love.

Start to love God now, with your eyes open. True love with open eyes grows stronger, not weaker, in the face of problems. Then you will know whether you have the right kind of love for—and faith in—the other person. If a couple remains close to each other after one year of marriage, you will know that they are on the right track. When they get even closer five years into their marriage, you can praise God that they really know what love is about.

Many Christians love God when they first come to Him. If their love for Him grows stronger over the course of five years, in contrast to Christians who are now nowhere to be seen, you will see the stark difference between the two kinds of faith and the two kinds of love.

## Two kinds of love and faith, and their differences

What are the differences between a saving faith and a faith that does not save, between a genuine love and a blind love? What is the right kind of faith and the right kind of love?

### 1. The one gives cheerfully, the other takes

The right kind of love and faith will readily give oneself to the other and not just take from the other. The difference is that one type gives and the other type takes. To take is to get something for nothing. I am alarmed by preachers who say, “Accept Jesus as your Savior today, and you will get many things from him.” If you are familiar with my preaching, you would know that I don’t talk like that. I would always speak of giving oneself to Christ as Christ gives himself to God. Now you know why I don’t speak of “accepting” Christ.

Many preachers prey on this base aspect of human love, saying: “If you believe in God, you will gain God as a bonus on top of everything else. You will have nothing to lose!” My preaching is exactly the opposite. When you come to Christ, you give him everything.

If a preacher says, “Come and accept Jesus; you’ve got everything to gain and nothing to lose,” many listeners will raise their hands. But one year later, what will happen to them? Where are they now? The average fallout rate of converts after one year is 80%, according to a survey done by evangelists.

But the fallout rate is almost zero among those who come to the Lord through my preaching. I have proved this because all who came to the Lord over the years in our Liverpool church are still standing. Is it that I am cleverer than these preachers? Not at all. I am sure that many of them are cleverer than I, or are better preachers, but the difference is the message: I determine to preach what the Lord Jesus taught.

Can you find anywhere in Jesus' teaching a statement that says, "If anyone accepts me..."? On the contrary, Jesus says, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out." (John 6:37) When does the subject ever expect the king to come to him? It is we who go to the king! It's not a question of us accepting Christ, though there is a kernel of truth to that. In a sense we do accept Christ, but more importantly, it is Christ who accepts us. In the teaching of the Lord Jesus, if you don't die to your self for his sake, you cannot be his disciple.

On the basis of what preaching did you become a Christian? Did you become a Christian to make Christ your possession, or was it to give yourself to Christ? There is a world of difference between the two. Are you a Christian who merely accepts Christ, or do you give yourself to Christ? If you give yourself to Christ, he will accept you. But if you are a Christian who accepts Christ to possess him and make use of him, you won't survive for long as a Christian in the realities of everyday life.

But we also know of encouraging examples. Many Christians are full of joy when they accept Christ. And why shouldn't they be? If they get the best present of all, they would be full of joy.

When I lead people to Christ, many of them have tears running down their faces. They enter into the kingdom with their spiritual eyes open. They see the hardships and difficulties ahead of them on the narrow way. They see the glory of God's kingdom, yet also the hard and narrow road that leads to it. They tell me, "I will take up the cross and follow my Lord from this day on." They go forward with tears running down their faces.

There is nothing superficial about this kind of Christian. They are a different type of Christian altogether. That is why you wouldn't be surprised when I tell you that their fallout rate is almost zero.

I would like you to examine yourselves. What is the nature of your faith? What kind of Christian life are you living? Did you become a Christian to gain things for yourself?

## **2. The one sees Jesus as king, the other sees Jesus as a gift**

The Lord Jesus is the King who rules over all. You cannot treat him as a gift inside a box tied with a bow, and say it is a gift from God for you to take home. God has indeed given us His gift, Jesus Christ, but the crucial point is that after we receive the gift, we must give ourselves to God. Then you will know what it is to be a true Christian.

This leads to another point. The difference between the two kinds of faith, and between the two kinds of love, lies in our perception of who Christ is. The Christian who only talks about accepting Christ lacks a right concept of his glory, majesty, and greatness. When problems arise, such a Christian will not

stand. It's the difference between choosing the easy road and the hard road. It's easy to receive a gift, but costly to give yourself.

### **3. The one looks to the future, the other, the present life**

In the parable, the Lord Jesus speaks of building two types of house. When the flood comes and the wind blows, one type will collapse in the storm, the other type will stand. Outwardly the two houses look similar, but that's only because their foundations are hidden. How do you tell the difference between two Christians when you see them in church? Both are polite and have smiling faces. They look the same outwardly, but what's crucial is the inward difference. One is built on rock, the other is sitting on sand.

That is the meaning of the parable. The life you live is likened to building a house. If you want to build a house rapidly in minimum time, just build it on sand. Why spend your energy, your strength and your money to build a house on a solid foundation? But the one who focuses on the long term will build it on rock.

It shows again the difference between the two kinds of faith which correspond to the two kinds of love for God. One type of Christian thinks only about the present, the other looks to the future right through to eternity. When you talk with them, you can tell what things occupy their thoughts.

One type of Christian is concerned only about his business, his exams, and so on. His whole thinking is focused on the

short term: today, tomorrow, and the day after. He has no spiritual vision of the future, for it is the present issues that are all-important to him.

But the other type of Christian gazes into the distance, for he is not shortsighted. Have you noticed that a person with a long view of the future doesn't get too anxious over problems that arise in the near term? He says, "Today and tomorrow are important, but not as important as the future I am building for." But to the Christian who thinks only about today, every small thing is a major disaster. That's because today and tomorrow are important to him.

Do you live only for today? "Let's eat and drink for tomorrow we die! Today is all we've got, so let's enjoy ourselves while there is still today." Or do you look into the distance? "It may be hard work, but the goal I am laboring for is worth it."

I am told that some people don't bother to work until they run out of money. Then they work a few days to earn a bit of money to spend on enjoyment. By contrast, some have a long-term view, working hard today to gain a better future. If you apply this to your spiritual thinking, you will truly get somewhere!

## **How to build a house on the rock?**

Ponder on the beauty of the Lord's teaching. After having understood what he is teaching us, you can start building a house on rock. There is the great rock right in front of you, so how are you going to put a foundation on it and into it?

Oh, it's hard work to chisel into the stone, to build a house on rock. The Lord Jesus describes the work this way: "he is like a man building a house, who *dug deep* into the rock" (Luke 6:48). He is not digging into mud which is easy, but digging deep into rock! That is hard work.

Think of the hours he spends chiseling into the rock with sweat running down his face, while the other fellow who builds his house on sand is having an easy time: he hammers some wood planks together, and behold, there is the house! He sits under a tree and smiles because he finished his house early, while the other guy is chiseling away at the rock, making only a small hole.

But he *dug deep*. He is not just chiseling a small hole in the rock, but digging deep into the rock. The other guy looks over and says, "He's wasting his time and energy. It's so nice and cool under my tree, but this guy is making life hard for himself!"

An English saying goes like this: he who laughs last laughs best. The guy sitting under the tree gets the first laugh because the other guy is chiseling away at the rock.

Summer passes and winter arrives. To understand this picture, you need to know a bit about the climate in Israel where in summer even rivers can become dry. But in winter, the rains come down hard. Suddenly there is a river where there was no river. Those living in the Middle East would know the word *wadi*. A *wadi* is a riverbed that is dry except in the rainy winter season. Then the rain comes suddenly!

So who gets the last laugh? When the rain comes down and the floods rise, the guy whose house is built on sand slides into the waters, and yells, “Help! Save me!” By then his house is smashed on the rocks and is washed away. But the man who builds on solid rock is safe, for he built the house with a long-term view of the future.

## The rock

What does the rock or foundation represent in the parable? In the Old Testament—namely, the Hebrew Scriptures which were familiar to Jesus’ Jewish listeners—the rock or foundation is the LORD God (Yahweh), as we will see in the next chapter. Yet Jesus Christ is the one sent from God and who does the Father’s works (John 5:19); hence in spiritual reality and in our spiritual lives, Jesus Christ is also the rock and foundation. 1 Corinthians 3:10-11 says:

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. (ESV)

If you build your life on Christ and root your life into him, you will be safe and secure. What does it mean to build on Christ? It means to live in total dependence on him, just as the house rests totally on the foundation of the rock. Ask yourself: Am I living a life that has an internal abiding in Jesus (John 15:4), living by his words that abide in me (John 15:7; Col. 3:16)? In

every problem, in every difficulty, do I depend wholly on Christ's words to do God's will, to bring forth an abundance of eternal fruit? Does God's spirit remind me or reveal to me the truth of Christ's words? Do I have total confidence in him? Have I built a solid, communing relationship with him?

The house doesn't just sit on the rock, it is dug into it. It is "rooted in Christ," to use Paul's expression, "rooted and built up in him" (Col. 2:7). Notice that the man "dug deep" (Luke 6:48). What does it mean to dig deep into Christ? It means that Christ is your goal in life. You are not satisfied merely with a superficial relationship with him, but want to go deeper into his life. Every day you strive towards becoming like Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Every day you put in the effort and energy to grow deeper into Christ, for it takes a lot of effort to build a house.

In the past week, how much effort have you put in growing deeper into Christ? How much time have you spent meditating on his words? Do you imitate Jesus in the way he communes with God his Father, going into an ever closer relationship with God as Jesus has taught us?

Young people spend hours with their girlfriend or boyfriend, yet to them it feels like five minutes! But to many, spending five minutes with God feels like many hours. How can you go deeper into Christ if you do not draw close to God as Jesus draws close to his Father? You are the kind of Christian who will be swept away when the storm comes. When the problems of life come, you will be gone.

## **Be rooted in Christ and not fall**

When the floods come, the house built on sand collapses. The faith of many will collapse at a time of testing. But the other type of Christian blossoms forth in a new strength they have not experienced before. It is as if the powerful floodwaters are nourishing their roots, and they spring forth in great power.

The flood that destroyed the godless in the days of Noah was the same flood that saved the godly. The floodwaters that destroyed the world were the same waters that lifted the ark and saved it. The Red Sea that parted to allow the Israelites, the people of God, to pass through, were the same waters that swept away Pharaoh's army.

The flood that wipes out Christians who have a nominal faith is the flood that strengthens the faith of true Christians with mighty spiritual power.

For your eternal welfare, I beg of you to consider what kind of faith you have. Are you building on the rock—Christ—or are you building on the shifting sands of this world? I pray that when the floods come—and they will come—every one of you will stand.

You may say, "Maybe the floods will never come." In that case, you are like the foolish man in the parable who is confident the floods will never come his way. That is why he built his house on sand in the first place. But the floods will certainly come. Make sure that your life is rooted in Christ, that you trust in him and commit yourself to him totally like a house that rests securely on the rock.

In 1 Corinthians 3:10f, Paul develops this idea of building on a foundation. Whether the superstructure you are building will survive or collapse will depend on the material you build it with. What's at stake is not only the survival of the foundation, but the survival of the house built on top of it. It will depend on the cost you put into it. If you build with costly things like gold, silver, and precious stones, it will withstand any test. But if you build with cheap material like wood, hay or straw, as many Christians do, it won't survive. You will be found empty-handed when the Judgment comes.

## **Live without regret**

I am sure you have found it costly to sit here today in the heat, but this cost is worthwhile. I hope that those who survive the floodwaters won't just survive by the skin of their teeth, ending with nothing much after the flood has passed. I hope they won't go to God empty-handed.

Some Christians will be saved yet regret they did not build for the future. Think of that Day when you stand before God's appointed Judge, the Lord Jesus Christ, before whom every one of us will stand, and discover that you are empty-handed.

My principle is this: Live your life such that you will have nothing to regret. I hope you will take this to heart. The man whose house got swept away has plenty to regret. Live a life with no regrets at the end. When you stand before the Lord Jesus on that Day, don't say, "Oh, how I wish I had lived my life differently!"

If you are still deciding on the question, “Shall I serve God, or shall I not serve God and make a better living?,” if you want any guidance, think on the principle: On that Day when I stand before the Lord, what will I wish I had done? I think you will immediately see what is the right thing to do now.

## Chapter 2



# A WISE MAN IS IN TOUCH WITH GOD, THE ROCK, THE KING

Matthew 7:24–27

“What is a Truly Wise Man?”

Melbourne Camp, January 13, 1990

<sup>24</sup> “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. <sup>26</sup> And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. <sup>27</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

(Matthew 7:24–27, ESV)

## Is life a joke?

**T**he theme of our camp is, “What is a Truly Wise Man?” What indeed constitutes wisdom? The other day I was looking at the newspapers, at Hong Kong’s *Sunday Morning Post*, November 26, 1989, and there is a section in color called, “Believe It Or Not,” which tells you all kinds of strange and wonderful things. One item was about Charles Boaz who works as a clown. Well, clowns are there to entertain, to make fun of, to joke, and to relieve the stresses of life. People are unlikely to think of a clown as a wise man, but as a fool. It is a clown’s job is to be a fool and not a wise man. So what is the point of talking about a clown in the “Believe It Or Not” section? What is so unbelievable about someone being a clown?

Well, Charles Boaz has a Ph.D., and we would usually think of someone with a doctorate as having reasonable intelligence. What is more, Dr. Boaz was an assistant professor of economic geography at the State University of Michigan. But he gave up his academic profession to become a fool, a clown. That is quite interesting.

Many of you in this camp are students, and you may be trying hard to get your secondary school certificates. And by the time you collect a Bachelor’s degree, you may feel that you are important in the world. And by the time you get a Ph.D., you think you have truly arrived! But here is a man who has achieved all of this, yet threw it all away to be a clown!

Historically, clowns go back to the times when kings were suffering from stress, especially in the European courts, just like people today. So what they needed was to have a clown at

the start or the end of the day, or whenever the stress was getting unbearable, to crack some jokes to relieve the pressure. In those days, there was no television for them to watch soap operas, so in a sense a clown performed an important function. But that was in the past. Nowadays, clowns entertain children so that their parents can be less stressed out, and all can have their ice cream cones.

Let us come back to this question of what makes a person with a doctorate—a wise man by the standards of this world—become a fool. Can you put yourself in his position and ask in what circumstances would you be willing to put your academic achievements behind you? It is not easy to be a professor or assistant professor, and then to give up the achievement to be a fool in a circus with donkeys, horses and monkeys.

Could it be that he felt that this whole question of the meaning of life is really a joke, so he might as well live out the joke in his own life? It could be that he was clever enough to see that life is just a joke, so let's live it as a joke!

## **What is the meaning of life?**

We are caught at both ends. We cannot see the problem clearly, either because we are too stupid on the one hand, or too clever on the other, and therefore cannot find an answer to the question of the meaning of life. We are caught in a cycle of stupidity and a cycle of futility. Dr. Boaz decided that if nothing can be gained in this futility, at least he can have a joke. It has to do

with the fundamental question of wisdom versus foolishness, and the question of the meaning of life.

### **“Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die”**

The Bible tells us of two ways of solving this problem, and Dr. Boaz solved the problem through one of the ways. In the Bible, one way is: Let us eat, drink, and be merry for one last night, for tomorrow we die (1 Cor. 15:32). That is the dilemma for many soldiers before a major battle. They know that this could be their last night because by tomorrow they could be dead. So let's have some beer and the last chocolate bar, have a good time and a good laugh. Let's live it up for the last few hours, for tomorrow we may all be dead!

You are living in this world, so with your limited time in the world, live it up with what you've got! If you own a house, buy a second one. If you own a car, get a luxury car with leather seats. Live it up! You haven't got that many years left.

But you are not the one who originally came up with that solution. It has been in the Bible all along. It doesn't mean that the Bible approves of it, but it is certainly one “solution” to the problem.

### **Build on sand: Don't do Jesus' teaching**

Then there's the other way the Lord Jesus mentions. He compares living your life to building a house. How you live is how you build your house. Every day, everyone in the world is building the house of his or her life. At the end of your life,

someone looks at you and says, “Ah! Here’s the house of your life—a beautiful, excellent house!”

A house is an achievement, a status symbol, isn’t it? A house is also a practical necessity because that is where you live, where your children live, and maybe where several previous generations lived. You don’t feel you are wasting your money on building a house. But on what foundation are you building it?

The Lord Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount by saying that you will build the house of your life either on rock or on sand. These are the two ways of building it. Matthew 7:24–27 is a familiar passage:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it. (Matthew 7:24–27, ESV)

This story is simple, and is something children learn in Sunday school. But like all the seemingly simple words of the Lord Jesus, this passage has a deep meaning. That we build our house on rock is easy to understand because we want the house to last; we wouldn’t want to build a house that will collapse tomorrow. Think of how much it costs to build a house with all the material that goes into a house: stones, steel, wood, cement.

Would you invest all this only to build your nice house on sand?

I have observed that Australians like the outdoor life. I was taking a walk with my wife Helen in a shopping center in Australia, and we walked into a department store with a huge section of outdoor camping equipment. Some of the tents have one room, some have two, and some even two rooms and a porch. With these spacious tents, I was wondering why anyone would bother to build a house. All you would do is buy one of these tents, and soon you will have a two-room house with a porch. That's wonderful! And when you want to move, just roll it up and take it to the next place. If your job requires you to relocate from Melbourne to Sydney, just pack up your two-room house and take it to Sydney, and it's ready in minutes. That is wonderful! You can build this house on sand or anything you like; if the ground underneath is breaking apart, just pack up the house and move it to another place.

But the Lord Jesus says, "If you hear my words and don't do them, you are like a man building a house on sand." You may say, "Surely nobody is so stupid as to build a house on sand." And I think that the Lord Jesus doesn't think that people are that stupid either.

### **A dream house half-hanging over the sea!**

A few years ago, I saw in a news magazine a photo of a house which was taken from a striking angle. Now where would you like to buy a house in Melbourne? I know where people in Hong Kong would like their houses located: by the sea where

they can get a sea view. If you have a beautiful sea view, the price of your house will go up. It seems that people in every country want a sea view. They want to see the vast sea out there, so they like to build near the sea, on the cliffs, where you can look out and see the beautiful sea.

The photograph in the magazine showed a house that was half in the air balancing over the sea, with the other half balancing on land!

This house was not very old, about 20 years. When the architects first designed and built it, there was a calculation error, so during those 20 years, the sea began encroaching on the land, eating away at the mud and the rocks on which this house was built. This beautiful dream house for which the owners saved up all their lives to have a beautiful sea view, was literally being eaten away underneath. At first there was a beautiful garden reaching out from the house to the sea cliff. Then their beautiful big garden began to get smaller and smaller as the sea eroded it, and eventually the whole garden was gone! If you open the door and are not careful, you may step out into the sea!

This house was well built, for the owner was wealthy. Otherwise it would have long fallen into the sea, room by room. By the time the photographer took a picture of this house, the earth underneath had eroded, leaving only the concrete platform and the house built on top of it. People are wondering when the whole house will just tilt over into the sea.

When I was looking at the photo of this house, I said to myself: “That’s exactly what the Lord Jesus is saying!” They put

their whole life savings into building this beautiful house with a sea view, but what are they left with now? They are going to lose the whole house to the sea at any moment! They are now trying to figure out how to save the house, because the sea will continue to eat away at the rocks and the mud underneath. Would you like to buy a house like this? You normally cannot get a spacious seaside house for less than half a million dollars, but in this case, no one would even want it as a gift because you might end up sleeping in the sea next morning!

## **Build on rock: Do God's Word and be in touch with Him**

What is Jesus telling us on this theme of being wise? In the Bible, the rock symbolizes God. This is seen many times in the Old Testament, e.g., "God is the Rock of my salvation" (Psalm 89:26). The message is that everything in this world will change and pass away, but God is the eternal Rock. He doesn't change or pass away. A rock is a symbol of eternity. A few verses earlier, in Psalm 89:18, God is said to be the King. In 1 Timothy 1:17, Paul speaks of "God, the King eternal." To build one's house on the rock is to build one's life on the eternal God who does not change.

Everything in this world is changing at an ever-increasing speed. One year ago, could you have imagined the things that are happening in Eastern Europe today? You wouldn't even begin to imagine it. Europe has changed beyond recognition in

one year. Even the Berlin Wall, made of rock that doesn't last, has been torn down.

In the Bible, sand is a symbol of transient things. If you build your life on temporary things, you will have nothing left at the end of the day.

God doesn't underestimate our intelligence. He is our Creator, and He did not create us stupid. I am sure He would not think that we are so stupid as to deliberately build our house on sand. Why then do people build on sand? It stems from a miscalculation, a failure to grasp the realities of life. More seriously, it is an *unwillingness* to grasp the realities of life. Today man is totally adrift because he has cut himself loose from God, the Rock of his salvation. And when you are cut loose from the Rock of salvation, you are left with nothing but sand. There will be nothing left to build on.

Three brief points before we move on. First, please be absolutely honest with me for a moment as I am preaching, because we are talking about things of eternal importance. Second, and more importantly, please be honest with God for a moment, even if that is the only moment in your life you can be honest with God. Third, I ask of you, please be honest with yourself even if you cannot be honest with anyone else. Can you answer this question honestly: *Are you in touch with the eternal God?*

If you are not in touch with the eternal God, the Rock of salvation, what else have you got left but sand? The parable tells us that there is either rock or sand, with nothing in between. So if you cannot build your life on rock, it's not because you are so

stupid as to build on sand, but because there is nothing left for you to build on apart from sand. As for our camp theme, to be wise is to get away from the shifting sands of time in this life, and get back to the Rock which is God, to build your life on the Rock that will not move. After glorious empires have come and gone, you will still be around because your God is the One on whom you have built your life.

What kind of man is the wise man? By now we know that he builds on the Rock. It means that he is in touch with God, the Rock. The house built on the rock is founded upon the rock. It is drilled into the rock. It is related to the rock. The Bible doesn't say that the wise man builds a house that merely balances on top of the rock. It doesn't say that he buys a drill from a hardware store, secures a few screws into the rock, and then ties the house to the rock with wire. The wise man is integrated into that rock. Is that a picture of your life? Are you in touch with the living God?

## **Do you want God to be King of your life?**

Let me try to explain why humanity today has lost touch with God, the Rock, and ends up living on sand. This will be a five-minute lesson on the whole Bible. A Bible school in five minutes!

What happened in the book of Genesis? When you read Old Testament history, one thing emerges: man does not want God to be the King of his life. As a result, humanity doesn't have the Rock on which to build. When Adam sinned in the Garden of

Eden, he had already declared by his sin that he wanted to go his own way without God running his life. This situation went on from bad to worse as you read on in the Bible. By the sixth chapter of Genesis—just a few chapters after the creation of man—humankind was already so deep in rebellion against God as King that the situation could not be remedied.

Let me ask you another question. I'm a straightforward preacher. I ask people questions. Is God the King of your life at this moment? Do you even know what it means to have God as King of your life? If not, then you wouldn't know what it means to be wise, because you wouldn't know what building on the Rock means.

Proverbs 1:7 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." How is the fear of the Lord the foundation of wisdom? Who do people fear? They fear the king, so they obey him. But man has supposedly "outgrown" such childish notions of fear. According to the great German philosophers whose brilliance can hardly be overestimated, man has grown up, and no longer fears anyone or anything. Children fear, but grownups fear nothing. But since they fear no one, they live in stress all the time. Yet the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. And when I fear God, I honor Him as King.

The history of the Bible speaks of a humanity that has rejected God as King. When Israel became a nation, who did they want? They did not want God as King, but wanted Saul: "Oh, he is so tall!" Maybe they enjoyed twisting their necks to look up at him. The Bible says that Saul was a head and

shoulder above the people (1Sam. 9:2), not just a head above. I am trying to think, how tall was he?

I have a very good friend in Canada, Clark Pinnock, who is a professor of theology. He is 6 foot 6. When I talk to him, I need a back support. I have a standard joke: I would say to him, "Clark, how is the weather up there?" I once gave him a lift from the university into town. After I pushed the passenger seat as far back as I could, he was struggling to get one leg in, then the other.

Saul was a head and shoulder above everyone else, so the people wanted him as king. They didn't ask how many brain cells he had. The only thing that mattered was that he was big and tall. They didn't want God as King, not realizing that He could kick him out at any moment. Eventually God did kick Saul out, and replaced him with a boy named David. Maybe David was around my height; when people talk to me, they don't have to twist their necks. So all through human history, we have rejected God as King.

If you want to understand the Bible, there is one central principle you must grasp. The whole Bible teaches one thing from beginning to end: God is King. If you don't like the word "King," you can call Him Chairman or President or Supreme Commander-in-Chief. Call Him whatever you like, but He is Number One.

## **God is King, and wants to be your friend!**

I have been reading a huge book, and the whole book expounds this very point. It was written by John Gray, a professor of theology in Scotland. The book is called *The Biblical Doctrine of the Reign of God*, which expounds the Bible from beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation, on the one central truth of God: that He is King. You may not like this teaching, you may hate it, you may even say, “I don’t believe it; I’m sick of it, and don’t want to hear it,” but that won’t make any difference, for that is what the Bible teaches. God is the one who will decide what will happen to your life. That is why I spoke of the law of the King in James 2:8. The wise are those who fulfill the law of the King. And His kingship is not something hard to bear because the Bible constantly teaches that He calls us into His friendship.

Yet I am not really interested in whether a person is a king or not. What I am interested in is: What kind of person is he?

I am a person who grew up in the corridors of power. I think no one in this hall has ever known what power is in the way I have known it. My father held a very high position in the former government of China. He commanded an army of nearly 40,000 men. He had two generals under his command, one of whom later became the commander-in-chief of all the armed forces in Taiwan. If any of you know Chinese politics, you would know his name, Sun Li-ren (Sun Li-jen in Wikipedia), an outstanding general. Even more interesting was that my father’s armies were not under the command of the central government; the armies were instead directly answerable to

him. Most of his armies were stationed near Nanking, which was the capital of China before the Communists came. When you have an army stationed near the capital city, you can easily surround it with your armies of 20,000 or 30,000 soldiers, and with your tanks, and quickly bring down the government. At the coastal waters of China, he commanded 100 gunboats, that is, speedboats armed with high firepower.

I know what it is to live among the powerful. I know what it is to talk with generals, and with the minister of this and the minister of that, even as a boy. Ambassadors of various countries were frequent visitors at our home. The famous American ambassador, John Leighton Stuart, was my father's personal friend, and he would often come to visit us. I still remember once when he came to visit us. He was a very tall man, maybe a bit like Professor Clark Pinnock, and he stooped down and said to me, "Do you know my name? My name is Leighton. Will you remember it?" I said, "OK, I'll remember you, Leighton." I didn't even know he was the United States ambassador! He said, "Always remember me, will you please?" I said, "I will try." So I have fulfilled my promise. I still remember him. You can see his name in history books today.

I know what power is. I have mixed with powerful men. I think because of this, I have no fear of any man of any position whatsoever, whoever they are. I think God has some purpose in all this.

When my father hosted a dinner for the Cabinet of China, I was very useful to have around, because politicians are always politicians. Often the question was: Who do you arrange to sit

next to the Vice Prime Minister of China at a small dinner table? At that time, Wang Yun-wu was China's Vice Prime Minister, and he later became Prime Minister. If you put the Defense Minister next to him, the Finance Minister would be unhappy. All these ministers were jostling for position as to who will sit at the right hand of the Vice Prime Minister. Notice that the Bible speaks of sitting at the right hand side. Well, they invited me to solve the problem! I sat at the right hand side of the Vice Prime Minister, sandwiched between him and his wife.

The important point is not whether you are king, or prime minister, or defense minister, or general. I had people walking in and out of my father's house, yet I didn't know who was the defense minister, who was the prime minister, who was the general—I had to count the number of stars on his shoulder to tell. To me, the important point is not what offices they hold, but what kind of people they are.

When I say "king" I am not thinking of someone wearing a crown and a long flowing robe, over which he will trip and fall on his face. I am not interested in his clothes; I only want to know what kind of person he is. For me, to know God as King is to know Him as the living God with whom I can fellowship every day. Even when I look at a beautiful scenery, I can thank Him and say, "God, how wonderful You are!" It is about God's being and character, not His office. Do you know this God as Friend?

It doesn't matter that your friend is prime minister, general, or ambassador. To me these ranks are irrelevant. For some reason, some people are drawn to me, and I have not found out the reason. In London, there was a general who came to me and wanted to be friends with me. I could not figure out why. He was old enough to be my grandfather.

To some people, it is glorious to have a general as a friend. In fact, I knew two generals in London who always wanted to talk with me, but I have never built a friendship with them. When I went to Israel, I was given the name of the Israeli Army Chief of Staff, General Yigael Yadin, a very famous scholar and general. I only talked to him over the telephone and greeted him for the sake of my friend.

Let me tell you the truth, I am not interested in generals and prime ministers. But I want to love, as God does, the simplest brother and sister. God shows His concern for a blind beggar through His Christ, the Lord Jesus. God's character is entirely different from that of the leaders of nations. We have recently read reports of the rottenness, corruption and brutality of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the fallen President of Romania. From his case, you can see why I'm not interested in people of high position: human beings are too small to be great. They are not great enough to bear the burden of power and remain pure. They become arrogant and corrupt. But my God and King remains the Friend of weak and lowly people.

## **Build your life upon the living God by “R-o-y-a-l”**

I want to ask you this question: Do you know this King? If not, do you want to know Him? Do you want to build your life upon Him, the Rock that never changes? We are dealing with something of extreme importance to your life. We have to get an answer to this question: How do I get to know the living God?

In closing, I would like to give you the principles of “the royal law.” The word “royal” will help you remember how to get in touch with the living God. I am not going to expound it today, but will continue tomorrow, if the Lord pleases. If you forget everything I said today, at least remember the words “the royal law” found in James 2:8. Here we are speaking of law in terms of the law of the King. I am quoting from James 2:8, and the whole book of James has a lot to say about wisdom:

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture,  
“You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well.  
(ESV)

You have a wonderful privilege. The whole world has rejected God, including most of the church, and I might say especially the church. Why do I say that you have a special privilege? Because God has so few friends today. Why is that so? Because people turn away from Him and do their own thing. They don't want God to be King over them.

Do you know what this means? It makes it easy for you and me to be friends with God because there are so few friends. I

would like to be one of His friends, if only to sit at the lowest place beside His feet, because I have seen the beauty of His face.

The word “royal” in the “royal law” is spelled r-o-y-a-l. The letter *r* is for “repentance.” The second letter *o* is for “obedience.” The third letter *y* is for “yoked.” The fourth letter *a* is for “absolute.” And the last letter *l* is for “launch,” as in launch out. In the next message, I would like to expound these five words because if you can grasp these five steps in the royal law, you will be able to build your life upon the immovable Rock.

## Chapter 3



# A WISE MAN GIVES WHAT HE CANNOT KEEP TO GAIN WHAT HE CANNOT LOSE

Luke 9:23–27

“What Is A Truly Wise Man?”

Melbourne Camp, January 14, 1990

<sup>23</sup> And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. <sup>24</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. <sup>25</sup> For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? <sup>26</sup> For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. <sup>27</sup> But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:23–27, ESV)

**W**e are facing many mountains today. You have mountains in your life; I have mountains in my life; the world is full of mountains; and the church is full of mountains. Today my heart is heavy because of the mountains that surround the church and exist within the church. I will explain the reasons for this later in the message. So we need the faith to pray this prayer for removing the mountains as in the song:

*Give me the faith that can remove  
And sink the mountain to a plain.*

Brothers and sisters, it may be too late for the church. I hope it is not too late for you.

My message today has two parts. The first part relates to you, each person individually, and brings out the truth that it is not too late for you. The second part relates to the church of God, to which you and I—we all—belong, if you are truly a Christian. Unfortunately, for most of the church, it is too late. Over the recent months, God has given me a prophetic message and prophetic insight that it is too late for the church. One morning, a few months ago, I said to my wife Helen, “It’s finished!” I think she could not quite understand what I was saying. I repeated to her several times, “It’s finished!” I will explain a little further on why this is so.

If the situation of the church is hopeless, why do we still sing the song, “Give me the faith”? Because there is still a small element of hope, brothers and sisters, and you are the hope for the church of God in these final days. We are living in the last

ten years of the second millennium of human history since the days of Christ. You and I are living in very important days, whose importance you and I don't even begin to understand. If all you think about in life, and through the coming days after this camp, is how to proceed with your profession, how to make more money, how to get more degrees, then you don't know the day or the hour in which you live, and you will be among the five foolish virgins who got locked out, and lost their hour of opportunity. Let us make this our prayer: Give me the faith!

## **Part 1: Be wise—Enter into a living relationship with God, the Rock**

The first part of my message is on what we didn't finish yesterday: How do we enter into a living relationship with the Rock of our salvation? If I asked you to stand up to declare publicly that you are in a day-to-day living relationship with God, how many in this room would dare stand up? I won't ask you because it is not my intention to embarrass anyone, much less make you feel proud of yourself when in fact your relationship with God may be weak. As one who has been in the pastoral work for many years, I have known very few people in any church who have a deep and living relationship with God. The church consists of many individuals. So if most Christians—

including you perhaps—have a weak relationship with God, what then has become of the church?

## **The church: Spiritually awake or asleep?**

I don't want to be unkind, but if your thinking is logical, you will notice some kind of contradiction in the title of the song we sang: "Awake, Awake, O Church of God!" What does the title tell you? That the church is asleep!

While I am preaching here right now, you wouldn't come up to me at the pulpit and say, "Will you please wake up?" But if I'm dozing off at the pulpit, you might say, "Excuse me, you're supposed to be preaching, so will you please wake up?" The fact that I am preaching is sufficient proof that I am awake, at least to some degree. Yet this song is saying that the church is asleep. As we read on in the lyrics, we find it a bit humorous that the present tense indicates that the church is still awake in a sense, yet it has to move on. This is confusing. If I am awake, I don't have to be told to move on. If I am moving on, I don't have to wake up. I don't like to be unkind; I really want to appreciate the heart of the songwriter whom I do not know personally. But at least he is clear on one thing: the church is asleep.

My dear brothers and sisters, if the only problem with the church is that it is asleep, it might not be so serious. All you have to do is to wake it up. To be asleep is not in itself a disease. At least I hope it is not a disease, for some types of sleep are indications of disease.

Let us come to the first part of this message: Are you spiritually awake? What does "awake" mean? It means that you

are aware of what is happening around you. But if you are asleep, you wouldn't know what is going on around you.

I remember the sweet early days of my life when I could sleep like a log. I think if a competition were held for sound sleep, I would win the prize. I always remember that while I was in school in Europe, there was an explosion outside our school. Everyone heard it and everyone woke up, but I was the only one who, when told about it the next morning, said, "Explosion? What explosion?" Of course, those old days are long gone sweet memories. Now my problem is just the opposite.

When you are sleeping, you are not aware of what is happening around you. When you are *spiritually* asleep, you don't see the spiritual meaning of the times in which you live. You don't even know what is happening to you spiritually, never mind other people. If you don't wake up the next morning, you wouldn't even know that you had died in your sleep. The church is full of people who don't know what is going on in the church today. They don't know what is happening to their own spiritual lives, and even worse, they don't care!

All of you here are literate. You can read and write. Brothers and sisters, if I read to you a passage from the Bible, and say, "This is what Jesus said," would you say to me, "Sorry, I don't understand it because I am illiterate"? Would you say, "Sorry, I am uneducated. The Bible is too deep for me, it's only for smart people"? Or is the real reason you don't know what the Bible is saying is that you are asleep and spiritually insensitive to the Word of God? We are not even talking on the level of spiritual wisdom. Wisdom is something too high for us. I am

only talking about being awake versus being asleep; I cannot get any more basic than that. If I expound on the Biblical teaching of wisdom, you will walk out of this place with a big head filled with lots of theory. I don't think that will do you any good. So let us just talk about very basic things for simple people like us. Let us just talk about being awake versus being asleep, never mind wisdom versus foolishness.

## **“Whoever loses his life for my sake will save it”**

Assuming that you are awake, let us read Luke 9:23–27, a passage you may have read many times. If you are awake, tell me what it means.

And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:23–27, ESV)

Here is a passage I am sure you have read many times. Is understanding this passage a matter of intelligence? Is it the case that intelligent people read these words and say, “Yes, I

understand it,” whereas those who are less intelligent say, “No, I don’t know what it means”? Or does the true problem lie in being spiritually awake versus spiritually asleep? Jesus is not speaking in riddles to confuse you. What he wants is that you may know the living God and build your life upon the Rock. He wants to point you to the path of eternal life. He is not trying confuse you with incoherent directions from point A to point B, “Turn right, turn left, turn right at the opposite junction, then turn left.” You will stand there and say, “Do you mean the first right or the first left? And what do I do after that?”

Much of our spiritual sleepiness stems from the wish that we could unhear what we have just heard. I have often noticed that when my preaching begins to cut into people’s heart, they close their eyes to quiet their hearts a bit because it is getting a bit uncomfortable.

What is the Lord Jesus saying here? He uses simple language:

*“If anyone desires to come after me”—If you don’t wish to come after me, you can start falling asleep now.*

*“let him deny himself”—But I don’t like to deny myself!*

*“and take up his cross daily”—Take up the cross to die to the self? And daily? No thanks!*

*“and follow me.”*

Then comes the interesting sentence: “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it.” Please raise your hand if you don’t want to save your life. Nobody is raising his hand here, so it means that everyone wants to save his life. But Jesus says,

“Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it,” which means that all of us are going to lose our lives because we all want to save our lives.

Consider the statement, “But whoever loses his life shall be saved.” Is it correct? You are wide awake, so read it again. Did Jesus really say, “If you lose your life, you will save it”? No, that is not what he said. When we are asleep, that is what we think he said. The crucial words *for my sake* need to be included: “But whoever loses his life *for my sake*, he will save it.” (Mt. 10:39; 16:25; Mk. 8:35; Lk. 9:24). That is to say, if your whole direction of life is moving towards living for Christ and for God, you will be saved. These are words of wisdom.

## **He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose**

I have heard the words of Jesus put differently, but are still very much the words of a wise man. The content is exactly the same in both cases, but the wording is different. Here are the words I hope you will remember and take with you as you leave this camp:

*He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep  
to gain what he cannot lose.*

It says exactly the same thing as the Lord Jesus said, but the words are different. These words are often attributed to Jim Elliot who was martyred for bringing the good news of Jesus

Christ to an aboriginal tribe in South America. These words were probably not composed by him, but were found in his Bible when they found his dead body by the Amazon in Ecuador.

Think on these words. Your degrees will be worth nothing when you die. You cannot keep your riches or your achievements. The Bible says you came into the world naked, and naked you will leave the world. You cannot take one thing with you. You have worked so hard for them but you will keep nothing. Think of any item you cherish, and you will soon realize you cannot keep it. And you cannot remain good in your strong areas, let alone maintain them.

Your health was once good, wasn't it? But as the years went by, you couldn't even keep your health, which is going down the drain. So what do you do? You try *qigong*. You should see how many books on *qigong* I have studied. We can try kung fu or tai chi at an older age, or more vigorous exercises at an earlier age, yet we cannot keep our health. The speed of our martial skills—and our countermoves—is constantly decreasing. The glorious days of the past are disappearing.

You may say, "But surely you can keep your knowledge!" My father had two doctorates as a young man (I still have his doctorate diplomas), but could he take them along with him? Obviously not. Every time I pass by Hawaii, I would visit my father's grave outside Honolulu. I would stand in silence and remember my father as a great man. Yet he could not take anything with him—not the armies under his command, not his learning, not one strand of hair from his head.

I return to the question, What can you count as truly yours, that you can take with you when you go? “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” There is the wise man! He gives away everything because he can keep nothing, and in exchange he gets what he can never lose. Now you can see what Jesus means when he says, “Whoever loses his life for my sake.” You cannot keep your life. You will lose it anyway, so why not lose it for something worth it? “He who loses his life for my sake will keep it for all eternity.” The spiritually foolish are those who try to keep the things they cannot keep. They will end up with nothing, empty-handed! Are you a wise man? Can you understand the meaning of this?

## **The full-time coworkers are wise men and women**

I was thinking to myself, “In these last days, God has done a wonderful work among us in our churches, and I consider it a privilege to be able to cowork with some 80 full-time coworkers. In fact, if we took all our coworkers from around the world and put them in this hall, it would be full with all 80 coworkers. By the grace of God, every one of them is a trained professional in their own particular fields. I think at least 98% of them hold degrees from various universities all around the world. And many of them hold higher degrees. If we put together all the degrees of our 80 coworkers, I think we would have a total of something like 120 degrees among us, although I have never counted them.

You are very privileged in Melbourne. You have three full-time coworkers at the moment, not counting those who are here just temporarily. Each of the three holds two degrees, that is, six degrees among the three, since each holds a Master's degree as well. But are they making a lot of money? I calculated from what the church is giving them that the whole team of 5 or 6 coworkers is earning less than what any one of them could earn alone if they were working in the world. And yet they are totally joyful and totally content.

Our Shatin church has ten full-time coworkers; out of the ten, five hold Master's degrees. Almost all of our full-time coworkers are trained in the sciences. And in our 5<sup>th</sup> Team, which is presently under training, there are 27 people, most of them computer experts of one kind or another. Many of them have held high positions in administration and in research. But if you come to visit them in Shatin, as some of you have, you will see how they live. They have left behind their big houses, their nice cars, yet they compete with one another to see who can squeeze into the smallest room! And I am the one who has to intervene to ensure that everyone has a decent place to sleep in. They are very wise men and women! But in the eyes of the world, they are fools!

Another time I was thinking, what would be the annual income if all of our 80 coworkers were in full employment in their respective professions? It staggers the mind to know how much they could earn if they were earning their expected incomes in the world. They are men and women of wisdom. Why? Because they have given up what they cannot keep to gain what they

cannot lose. And what they cannot lose is not something they will get only in the future when they die and are buried: right now they are already experiencing what it is to gain something they cannot lose. They are experiencing the living God now! Isn't that marvelous?

Every man and woman among our 80 coworkers is free to leave the team at any time if they wish. I say to them, "There is only one thing that binds you and me and all of us together: the love of God, and the mission that God has put into our hearts." If any coworker has lost this vision, or does not wish to continue, he or she can feel free this minute to walk out and not come back.

What is more, if any of our coworkers fails to meet the highest standard of spiritual excellence—and the standard is already so high that it boggles the minds of most people—I will talk to them heart to heart and say, "I'm sorry to tell you this, but I don't think that you are fit for the work of God. Go back to the profession that you gave up. Earn your money in this world, build your house, buy your car, but leave the team."

One of the highest penalties in our team for failing to meet the standard of excellence is suspension from the team. They will be asked to leave the team for two or three years, maybe permanently, and there have been a few who have been expelled from the team. They have given up everything for God's sake, but failed to meet God's high standard. That standard applies not just to our 80 coworkers but to me as well. Should I fail—and God help me that, by His grace, it will not come to pass—then I am out!

God is doing amazing things. When I look at the way my beloved coworkers live before God, I see the glory of God in their lives. I know that God is real because I have seen the power of His work in their lives in a way which they themselves cannot see. It is this that keeps me going day after day, especially when I am so exhausted from the work load that I can hardly get up on my feet in the morning. I think few of you can even begin to imagine what it is like to serve as a sort of general supervisor for the work of eight churches, while carrying on with the full-time training week after week. After the last Port Dickson camp, I confess to you that I could hardly get up on my feet for three days. I love to swim, and Port Dickson is located right by the beach, yet for three days, I didn't even have the strength to climb into the waters. Only on the last day did my wife say to me, "We are leaving tomorrow. Will you not try to swim just once, for one or two hours?" She knew I was struggling over this for several hours before I finally got enough courage to crawl into the water to swim even though swimming usually takes me no effort at all.

Let me repeat the statement once more: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." This is the principle behind Jesus' teaching when he says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth where moth, rust, thieves, wars, whatever, will rob it all from you." You cannot keep these riches, so transfer your treasure to where it cannot be taken away from you.

I have lived through two wars in China: the Sino-Japanese War and the Communist War of Liberation. I have seen people

who used to have millions of dollars begging on the streets for a bowl of rice. They were not wise enough to see that they could have exchanged their money—which they could not keep—for what they could not lose. They are fools! They did not understand the kind of world in which they lived.

Right now, you may have a million dollars in your bank account, but don't be surprised if one of these days there is a financial crisis, and you are left with nothing. Someone I knew from my student days in London was a multi-millionaire, but one day the stock market crashed, and he ended up with nothing! One day he was a multi-millionaire, the next day he had nothing. And I remember the words of the Lord Jesus to the rich fool, "You fool! Tonight your life will be required of you." Even your life will be gone. What are you going to do with your millions?

## **How to be wise, with a living relationship with God**

### ***R* is for repentance**

How do we exchange what we cannot keep for what we cannot lose? The Lord Jesus tells us how to do this because he doesn't want to keep us in the dark. Yesterday I talked about the royal law. The word "royal" consist of five letters, *r-o-y-a-l*, each of which stands for something significant for our present topic.

The first step in the royal law, or the law of the king, is *repentance*. You learned about repentance in Sunday school,

but do you know what repentance really is? One of the great difficulties in teaching is dealing with those who think they know something when they really don't. Everyone says, "Oh, I know what repentance is," yet does not begin to understand what repentance is.

In Matthew 4:17, the very first word that the Lord Jesus preached was "repent". Why repent? Because God's kingship is about to be implemented. God is about to reign as King upon this earth. The Bible does not teach that God is King only in heaven. The point of Jesus' message is that God is going to reign here in Melbourne; God is going to reign as King on this earth. And Jesus is saying that because God is going to reign soon, you had better repent. You need to repent in order to enter into a living relationship with God.

Repentance is not just saying "sorry" and then repeating your sin the next time. That is not repentance. Repentance in the Bible means that your whole direction of life has changed. To use Jim Elliot's statement, the true substance of repentance is to give what I cannot keep to gain what I cannot lose. It is a complete change of direction in life. I can expound each of these points with a whole message, but I am just touching on them and moving on to the important last part of this message.

## **O is for Obedience**

The second thing is *obedience*. If you want to know the living God, you must learn obedience. In the Bible, obedience does not mean obeying with a long face, but obeying joyfully, as we read in Hebrews 10:7, "I have come to do your will, O God." If

you tell me with a long face, “From now on, I will obey God,” I will say, “Forget it.” But if you say, “Can I have the privilege of living in obedience to God?” I will see that you are beginning to understand the truth.

The gospel as preached in the churches today is some kind of intellectual exercise: believe and you will be saved. Yet the gospel is not just to be believed, but obeyed, as we read in John 3:36; 1 Peter 4:17; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Peter 3:1; 1 John 5:2.

### **Y is for Yoked**

The third point is *yoked*. To be yoked means to be joined to Christ. Those who are going to be baptized today will be yoked to Christ through baptism as new people, just like two persons getting married will be yoked to each other, bound to each other, through marriage. So we have the sweetness of communion with Christ, and through him with God, because now we have “commitment,” a term we use often. Yoked means commitment: I am committed to Christ, he is committed to me. And this yoke is most important because it is the source of our strength. In a marriage, when one person is weak, the other will support him or her.

What is the point of getting married? Is it to come home for a good quarrel after a whole day’s work? Is it to throw plates at each other as some kind of physical exercise? What is the point of getting yoked together? When two animals are yoked together in a farm, they both carry the load. Likewise when two people are yoked together, they carry the load together instead of working individually.

But in many marriages today, there is a brake on the yoke such that one is trying to go forward, and the other is trying to go backward. It reminds me of cars for driving schools where the instructor has a brake on his side and the student driver has one on his side. When the student steps on the accelerator and the car doesn't move, it is because the instructor is stepping on the brakes on his side. That's how it is with many marriages. Those of us in pastoral work have to counsel people with marriage problems, and you wonder why they got married in the first place. Maybe they got married because they enjoy kung fu or boxing, and had no one to fight. Let me assure you that God does not want us to get baptized and yoked to Christ so that we fight him every day. The Lord Jesus has better things to do than that. God wants us to be bound with Christ so that in him we can walk forward hand in hand in sweet fellowship and encouragement.

### **A is for All, Absolute**

The next letter is *a*, which stands for “all” or “absolute.” This part is very important in the Lord Jesus' teaching, yet it is on this point that most Christians are stuck. I don't know how many endless hours of counseling that I, not to mention all our coworkers, have spent with people who don't understand this basic principle of how much one ought to be committed to God. The person may say, “I am 75% committed to God, so can I be baptized?” and we say, “No, that's not enough. 75% will not do.”

“80%?”

“No.”

“85%?”

“No.”

It is like bargaining at a Hong Kong market. They don't understand that God requires all or nothing. That is the Scriptural teaching, not something we invented. Those of you who have gone through Commitment Training would know this, so I don't need to spend time on this point. You must love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, with *all* your soul, with *all* your mind, with *all* your strength. You are to love Him with all—with everything—you have.

The words in Luke 14:33 are even more uncompromising: “He who does not forsake all that he has cannot be my disciple.” This does not mean that you go sell your car and house, and sleep on the streets. What it means is that from now on you will say, “God, You have redeemed me with the blood of Jesus. I belong to You, and everything I have is Yours.” It is just like in a marriage. Everything I possess, including this beautiful jacket, belongs to my wife. I gave up everything when I married her under this yoke. If she wants my wallet, she can have it. I would never say, “Don't touch it, it belongs to me,” about anything I own. When I married her, I forsook myself; everything is hers, and she is mine. So why do we find it so terrible that the Lord Jesus says, “Unless a man forsake all that he has, he cannot be my disciple”?

## **L is for Launch out**

*L* is for *launch out*. One of the reasons Christians do not enter into a deep relationship with God is that they are cowards. Many people are eager to get married, yet do not understand that it takes a lot of courage to get married. If you have never been married, you wouldn't understand this whole problem. You are going to give your life to someone for the next 50 years, or however long you will be together. Yet it takes even more courage to be a Christian. The problem with many Christians is they don't have the courage to launch out into something new. Marriage is something new, but becoming a Christian is something even newer.

America became great because of its pioneering spirit: Go west, young man! Launch out into the unknown! That is the kind of attitude you see in Peter. In Luke 5:4, the Lord Jesus tested Peter by saying, "Take the boat and launch out into the deep." In Luke 8:22, Jesus told his disciples to launch out and cross over to the other side of Galilee. But they launched out straight into a storm! The Lord Jesus knew that the storm was coming, yet he said to them, "Take the boat out into the lake." Becoming a Christian is not for cowards, for it takes courage to launch out into something new. And it takes great courage to give up what you cannot keep to gain what you cannot lose.

## Part 2: The church of God is dead

I come to the last part of my message. The first part dealt with each one of us individually, how we can enter into a living relationship with God in what the Bible calls “wisdom”.

Before we close, let us talk about the church. When I talk about the church, my heart gets very heavy. I am not saying that the other churches are bad whereas our church is good. Anyone who thinks I talk like that does not understand me. If you and I are true Christians, we are part of the whole church of God spread throughout Australia, Canada, and the rest of the world. I am not talking about your church or my church, but the church of God as it stands on earth today.

What is the problem with the church? I find it hard to speak on this because the more I think about it, the heavier my heart gets. We can say in one sentence that the church is simply not the church that God meant it to be. Today the church which we call “the church of God” is simply not the church that Christ died for. Please wake up and see the situation if you have not already fallen asleep spiritually. The church has been totally corrupted by the world, and I mean *totally*. If you truly walk with God, it would hurt your heart as it hurt mine.

We can run away from the problem by saying that by God’s grace, our group of churches is building up churches that are vigorous and full of God’s life, and are growing at a remarkable speed. But if we think like this, we are foolish because sooner

or later, what is happening to the other churches all around us will eventually affect us as well, for we are one body. If I have cancer in the liver, my heart may still be healthy, my brain may be healthy, at least for the moment, but if the problem is not treated, the cancer in the liver will spread to my whole body, and kill me in the end.

If the church were only asleep, it would not be too big a problem. But the church is not only asleep but also blind! It does not see the dangers ahead. Worse than that, the church of God is dead! It is a corpse! And God's judgment will come upon His church.

## **The church has been corrupted by the world**

I was in Malaysia recently for a camp, and there I was reading the newspapers and gathering some interesting material. I keep in touch with the latest news developments all the time.

Here is a picture that really made me think. It shows a huge snake, a python, seven meters long—22 or 23 feet long—about the length of a room, coiled around several times. A little child was relaxing on the snake and playing with it. The snake could make a meal of this child in a few minutes if it happened to be hungry. It was obviously not hungry at the moment. A python kills its prey by crushing it to death before swallowing it. This seven-meter python could almost swallow a whole cow, not to mention this six-year-old boy!

In this picture, I see the church and the world. In the Bible, the snake is a symbol of Satan. The snake in this photo has a

beautiful and attractive pattern on its skin. It looks so friendly, so gentle, and so tame that the parents could entrust it for their son to play with it. The boy doesn't even know what this snake can do to him, just as the church doesn't understand what the world can do to it. To me, this is a parable. As I pondered on it, I said, "Lord, has this happened to the church?" The serpent, the deadliest enemy of the church, has become the friend of the church! A very strange thing has happened.

The world honors those of us who are pastors. When I was invited to pastor the church in Montreal, I applied for immigration to Canada. Because I was a pastor, they moved me from the end of the queue to the front, without my having to line up as everyone else did. The snake has become my friend! What has happened to the church? The church has been corrupted.

## **What does God expect His church to be?**

Let us summarize in a few points what God expects His church to be.

### **1. The church is one**

The church is to be one. Wherever the Bible speaks of the church, you see the word "one" or an equivalent concept. 1 Corinthians 12:12–13 says,

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For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body... (ESV)

Paul exhorts the church to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of love, so that the world may see God's oneness through the oneness of the church. In this context, the word "one" does not mean numerical one. It means harmony; it means love; it means peace in relation to one another; it means cooperation; it means caring for one another. No matter whether you are Baptist, Methodist, or Anglican, we are one.

But you don't have to be a Christian to know that the church is *not* one. It ceased to be one long ago. Not only is it not one, there is constant infighting and verbal attacks within the church. Someone criticizes me, criticizes you, or criticizes the other person. Is this the church of God? That is why I say this is not the church of God. Did Jesus die for this? The church is a disgrace to God's name, let's put it in plain language. If you have ever attended a meeting of pastors, you will go away with a heart weighed down like a stone. There is probably nothing so disgraceful in this world as a meeting of pastors. When pastors get together and the congregation is not there to see them, God help us! A gathering of businessmen would be more harmonious, more peaceful, more positive than a gathering of so-called "pastors". This is not the church God sent Christ to die for!

## **2. The church is light**

What else is the church meant to be? The Lord Jesus says, “You are a city set on a hill, a light that shines for everyone to see.” The church is meant to be light. Paul says to the Ephesians, “Once you were darkness, now you are light in the Lord” (Eph. 5:8). Let me ask you, even if you are not a Christian, do you think that the church is light? It’s a disgrace! It’s a shame! I feel embarrassed to be a member of the church. Read the newspapers: this pastor runs away with money, that pastor runs away with a woman, and another molests children. I have had enough of reading this! And when pastors commit these sins, what does the church do? Nothing! Sin counts for nothing in the church! Is this the church of God? Look into the New Testament to see what the New Testament church was like. Then look at the church around you, and you will see that these are two different things.

## **3. The church is a family**

Let us talk about the most elementary thing the Bible says about the church: the church is a family. That is why we call each other brothers and sisters. We care for one another. But if you visit a church, you will find that in some cases, no one even says hello to you.

If you walked into your own house and nobody says hello to you, you would think, “Have I come to the wrong place? Is this my home?” Nobody even greets you in this so-called “church.” Is this the church of God? Then you meet the pastor. Oh, he is the mighty man! He has gold-rimmed glasses like me, and his

attitude is: “Do you know who I am? I’m the pastor here.” You will say, “Sorry, I didn’t recognize you.” This is a pastor? Where is the beauty, the humility, the glory of Christ? If the church of God is led by people like this, what is going to happen to it? So help us God! I don’t mean I am any better than they, but one thing I cannot stand, brothers and sisters, is hypocrisy. Come to me some time, and I will tell you about my weaknesses. Or ask my wife, and she will tell you. But I trust that hypocrisy is not one of my weaknesses. One thing I don’t understand is the hypocrisy of pastors. That is something beyond my comprehension.

I once visited the church of a well-known pastor in Toronto who never ceases to say evil things about me behind my back. A couple in his church, who used to be a couple in our church, wanted me to preach their wedding message at their church. So for their sake, I went over to preach at their wedding. When I arrived at this big Toronto church, this pastor immediately greeted me, “Ah, Pastor Chang, how are you?” I looked at him and simply said, “Good morning,” and not another word. He stretched out his hand to me, but I refused to shake it. You didn’t know I’m that bad, did you? Now you know! Do you know why? I cannot stand hypocrisy. This pastor had been saying evil things about me behind my back for at least a couple of years, but what does he do when he sees my face? He becomes the perfect actor! I mean, Hollywood has not seen anything of this caliber!

To tell you the truth, brothers and sisters, if he were a businessman who spoke every evil about me falsely, I would

shake his hand. I would show him the love of Christ. If possible, I would brush his shoes. But I will not tolerate a pastor who is a liar and a hypocrite. Having said “good morning” to him, I walked past him without a smile on my face. He tried to follow me to talk to me, but I refused to talk to him. I will not speak to a hypocrite because my Lord Jesus cannot stand hypocrites. Read this for yourself in Matthew chapter 23. He said to the religious leaders, “Woe to you, Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like a tomb, whitewashed on the outside, but inside you are dead men’s bones!” The Lord Jesus cannot stand the church with its hypocrisy.

I say to you brothers and sisters, you may have faults like I have, but I beg of you one thing, please may hypocrisy not be one of them. Be an honest person, a genuine person, and the world may hate you for it. That famous pastor in Toronto kept telling everyone I never smiled at him when I went to his church. Well, that is true. I never smiled at him; and I will not smile at him until the day he repents before God of the lies and the hypocrisy in his life. There is the disease of the church. What happens to a church when it is led by a man like this? And let us be fair to this man: he is not the only hypocrite in the church, nor even the only pastor who is a hypocrite.

These famous pastors in Toronto don’t love me. They fear me because they know I will not spare them if they dare so much as commit one sin. The strangest thing is this: they may hate me right to the bone, yet every time they see me, they bow and fawn. And do you want to know something terrible? I am ice cold to them! I am a servant of God, not a church politician.

I am at least a minor prophet of God in the sense that the Chinese churches in Australia, Canada, and around the world hate me, because I am not kind to them, because I expose their sins, because I denounce their evil right to their faces.

But I will tell you another side to me in case you think, “Wow! This is a terrible man!” I aspire to be one thing: to be a friend of sinners, to be a friend of the weak, to be a servant of the poor, to be friends with those who are meek and lowly. If you are among the meek and lowly, I not only want to be your friend, I would like to be your servant, because the Lord Jesus said, “I came into the world not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45).

## **God will destroy the unrepentant, worldly church**

In closing, I will share with you a dream I had in Kuala Lumpur just before coming to this camp. I have shared it with our coworkers in Kuala Lumpur. I seldom dream, and if I ever have a dream, I usually cannot remember it.

In my dream, I was walking by a large and ancient pool dating from the time of Jesus, which supplied water to the city of Jerusalem. Today it is surrounded by a steel fence because it is a tourist attraction. I studied at Hebrew University in Jerusalem in my student days, which is why I knew I was walking past Mamilla Pool in Jerusalem. As I was walking, I thought to myself, “How is it that I am in Jerusalem?”

I looked around, and what struck me was that all the buildings looked as if they were hit by a hydrogen bomb. When something is burned, it turns black, but apparently, when it is hit by one of these dreadful bombs, they turn yellow. Everything was dead. The pool had no water, the buildings were destroyed, Jerusalem was destroyed. Suddenly my heart became very heavy. Jerusalem is dead!

Then I noticed a tunnel. I knelt down, and walked into this tunnel on my knees, for my heart was so heavy I could not walk on my feet. The surface was very stony and rough, but if it was ripping my knees, I did not notice it.

Jerusalem, the city above, was dead! Why? Because we know from the Bible that when God brings judgment upon a nation, the nation is destroyed. But there were lots of people in the tunnel underneath. I would expect the people to be repenting of their sins because God's judgment had come upon them, yet I did not see any repentance. To my astonishment, I saw a cinema, and people were crowding in to watch a movie. At the other side, I saw another cinema into which the people were streaming to get more entertainment. And I said, "O my Lord God! Judgment has destroyed Jerusalem, yet there is no repentance!" The people's hearts are going after the world! They seek entertainment and amusement in the midst of destruction and death. They are trying to forget the problems which are entangling them.

I woke up from this vision, and grief filled my heart. In the Bible, Jerusalem is a symbol of the church. God's judgment is coming upon the church, but where are those who repent? Paul

speaks of the church as the glory of Christ, something beautiful and manifesting the light of God to the whole world, so that the nations may stream into the church with one specific request: Teach me how to know the living God. That is what we read in the Bible (Isaiah 2:3; Micah 4:2). The church is meant to be glorious, but it is dead, disunited, led by hypocrites. There is no love, no righteousness. Truth has been rejected and discarded. Is this the church for which Christ died?

## **Are you among “the wise” whom God will preserve?**

I think of the Lord Jesus hanging on the cross, with his blood flowing out for us to build the church, a new society, a new community of righteousness and truth in which God is King and where His glory shines. Show me that church! Where is it? Did Christ die in vain? If there is any hope left, brothers and sisters, you are that hope. Will you let the glory of the living God shine forth from your life in the days before the church is finally wiped out by Him?

God is going to destroy the church! Read your Bible and you will know. God cannot tolerate hypocrisy and corruption, but He will preserve a remnant of “the wise”, just as He did in the Old Testament. The Bible calls that final, faithful remnant “the wise”. Are you part of that remnant which, when people look at you, they will say, “I have seen you and God’s glory in you!”? The time that is left for this world is very short, and if there is any hope left, you are that hope. Are you among the wise?



## Chapter 4



# PARABLES OF THE NEW AND THE OLD WINE & WINESKINS, CLOTH & GARMENTS

Matthew 9:14–17

Montreal, 1977

**I**would like to share with you a very important passage, Matthew 9:14–17, taken from the teaching of our Lord Jesus. Its importance is seen in the fact that it is found in all of the first three Gospels. Here is Matthew’s account:

Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then

they will fast. No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.” (Mt. 9:14–17, ESV)

## **Jesus the bridegroom brings the joy of the new life**

In this account, John’s disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” Jesus replied, “Can the wedding guests mourn while the bridegroom is with them?”

Fasting is often carried out to express mourning for sin. It is also done for the purpose of spiritual self-discipline against sin, that is, to fight sin in our lives. Fasting has its value and importance, but it is not meant for certain occasions as when the Lord Jesus fellowships with his disciples. But he says, “The day will come when I, the bridegroom, will be taken away from my disciples, and they will fast.”

Jesus goes on to say that no one patches a piece of new unshrunk cloth on an old garment, otherwise, when the new cloth shrinks, it will tear away from the old one. And you don’t put new wine into old wineskin that has lost its expandability, because when the new wine ferments, it will expand and burst the old wineskin. You pour new wine into new wineskin which is soft and expandable, so that the new wine ferments and

expands along with the wineskin. In ancient times, people did not use bottles but animal skin for storing water and wine.

Why does the Lord Jesus talk about a bridegroom, and the next moment about a garment and wine? What is the link between them? He is obviously using picture language, but what is the connection between them? It turns out that they have a beautiful connection to each other. I always marvel at the Lord's teaching.

These two things—a new garment and new wine—are essential to a wedding. You don't expect the bride or bridegroom to arrive at their wedding in an old garment with a patch here and a patch there. And there is wine at every wedding as an expression of joy. We recall that the wedding at Cana was running out of wine, so Jesus performed his first miracle by God's power: turning water into wine.

Those of you who have read the book *Revival in Indonesia* would know that God still does such things today where there is a necessity. In the revival in Indonesia, thousands of people came to the Lord. After they had been baptized in the sea, they were about to have their first communion. Can you imagine arranging communion for five or six thousand people? You will need an enormous amount of bread even if each person takes a small piece. And where in Indonesia will they get the red wine that represents the blood of Christ? They can't have only bread and water, so they got together to pray to God, saying, "Lord, what shall we do?" Then one among them who had the prophetic gift said, "Fill the jars with water," and they prayed over the jars for half an hour. And when they poured out from

the jars, they got wine! The water had turned into red wine! And this happened not just once, or twice, or three times, but I believe ten times by the time the report was written! This book was written by Kurt E. Koch, a German who was at first skeptical of all this, as Germans are likely to be. But when he saw these things with his own eyes, he felt ashamed and humbled. God performs the same miracles today as Jesus did in his day.

What is the spiritual lesson of water turning into wine? To be sure, it was meant to provide wine for the communion, but the more important message is that God is the One who transforms us. Why does Jesus speak about the new wine and the new garment? These two processes—the fermenting and the shrinking—depict the power of the gospel. The gospel is God’s power to transform and to save those who obey Him.

## **Garment and wineskin are a picture of human life**

When you study the Lord Jesus’ teaching but don’t understand it, often it is because you are unfamiliar with the Old Testament. The principle is that if you see something you don’t understand, look for it in the Old Testament, and there it may be explained to you. If you don’t understand what “garment” and “wineskin” mean, turn to the Old Testament, and there you will find them explained.

Here I give you a few Old Testament references in which garment represents human life, so that you may understand today’s passage: Isaiah 50:9, 51:8, 52:1, 61:10; Psalm 102:26.

There is also the picture of wineskin as a symbol of human life. In Job 32:19, the heart of man is pictured as wineskin: my heart is like wineskin stretched to the point of bursting. In Psalm 119:83, the psalmist says he is like wineskin that has been blackened with smoke. In Jeremiah 13:12–13, the people of Jerusalem are compared to wineskins.

## **Warning: You cannot patch the new with the old**

In Ephesians 4:22 and Colossians 3:9, Paul says, “Put off the old self,” which is the old nature, and “put on the new self,” that is, put on the likeness of God. Becoming a Christian is not a matter of taking your old character and nature, and patching it up with a bit of faith. It means *a total change* in which you remove the old nature and put on the new nature. That is exactly what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:15–17, that becoming a Christian is not just adding some religion to your old makeup, but becoming a new person.

Which is more wonderful, changing water into wine, or changing a sinner into a saint? Both are wonderful but which one is more meaningful? I think that changing a sinner into a saint is more meaningful. Changing water into wine is meant to point to something much more meaningful and important: the changing of the character of your life. If you have experienced God’s power to change your life, you are on the path to knowing Him.

I say again that becoming a Christian is not merely adding some religion to your life. You may say to yourself, “My life is incomplete and feels empty. I feel a hole here and a hole there, so I’ll patch them with some Christianity.” Jesus says that if you do that, your last state will be worse than your first. Try it, and you will know that the Lord Jesus is right.

There are people who, when they hear the gospel, accept the part they like and reject the part they don’t like. They would say, “I like this part but not the part about total commitment. A little religion is good for you, but not too much. If you take up too much religion, you’ll become a fanatic.” Many times I have heard people say, “Going to church once a week is okay, but twice a week is too much.”

The church is full of beggars. If you see someone wearing clothes with lots of patches, what would you think? That he is a beggar! Yet people come to church and say, “I like that part of the message, so I’ll patch my hole with it. But the other part of the message is too strong for me; I can’t take it.”

Some people are even proud of their patches. Patched jackets and especially torn jeans are the latest trend in fashion, and these are more expensive than those without patches. I once asked a salesman, “Why do you sell this old junk more expensively than the new clothes?”

He said, “It’s not old junk, it’s new!”

I said, “Why then is it all patched up?”

“That’s the new style.”

“But why is it more expensive when it’s all patched up?”

He said, “You have to pay for the labor. It takes work to stitch the patches together. And after stitching them, you have to tear the fabric by hand to give it a torn look.”

This world is really upside down! You have to pay more for rags than for good clothes. You have to pay extra for the labor of tearing your pants. Some people even feel that dirty pants look nicer! In the same way, some Christians in the church today are proud of their patchy faith. They even think that it looks beautiful!

## **The new will tear the old**

In the teaching of the Lord Jesus, if you want to be a true Christian, don't pick and choose those parts of the gospel that suit your taste. At first your patch may look nice, but wait till the rain comes. What will happen when your wet patch starts to dry? The unshrunk cloth will start shrinking and tear you apart. That is why there are so many casualties in the church. Many people go to church to pick and choose what they want of the gospel, and in two or three years, they are torn apart and mixed up spiritually.

The Lord Jesus is saying, “You cannot take piece by piece the salvation that I give you. Take everything or take nothing.” There is so much power in the gospel that there is power even in the small piece of cloth you took, powerful enough to cause great agony to your old nature. You may say to yourself, “If I take too much of the gospel, I'll become a fanatic. So I'll take a small piece that won't hurt me.” But before long, that tiny bit

will make the “one-quarter” Christian or the “three-quarter” Christian feel uncomfortable. I have seen people do this kind of thing, and they are reaping the consequences. By then it will be very hard to help them. I repeat, the gospel is powerful, and you cannot play around with it.

The Lord is saying that you cannot take the new wine of the gospel and put it into your old life, because the new wine is powerful. It will expand and burst apart your old life, tearing it to pieces. The old life cannot coexist with the gospel. You cannot live in sin and believe in the gospel. That won't work. You cannot live a proud, self-centered life, and hope to believe in the gospel. Only when you say, “Lord, change me completely; I will put away my sins and my old life,” can you receive the new wine of the gospel.

I hope that when we preach the gospel, we won't talk about religion but about the power of God. I am not asking you to join a religion or become holy and pious outwardly. What I am saying is that the gospel is God's power unto salvation. You cannot save yourself, but God can save you. When you experience His power, you will understand what we have been talking about.

## **New wine, new garment: Joy in the Holy Spirit**

New clothes also symbolize joy. At Chinese New Year, children and adults in China put on new clothes. The children hardly dare to move around when they are wearing their new clothes.

That is the one time they behave themselves. And why is it a time of joy? It is the New Year!

Wine is also a picture of joy in the Bible. Just as wine makes the heart cheerful, you have joy when the Holy Spirit of God comes into your life.

Before I came to the Lord, I didn't understand what joy was. I asked myself every day, "Why is life is so meaningless?" I grew up surrounded by suffering. I still remember from my childhood in China the war with Japan. Families were separated. My father left home to fight the Japanese. There was suffering as we wept at his departure, not knowing whether we will see him again, or how long he will be away. In fact, when he came back five years later, I could not recognize him because I was too young when he left. I never had much of a family life because there was war all the time.

The Sino-Japanese war was hardly over when we had the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. Again there was suffering. There was not enough food, not enough of anything. Every day you could see refugees on the streets in their suffering. Every day, I would see dead bodies lying around, either killed by war, or dead by suicide because they could not take it anymore. I was brought up in suffering, and if you asked me, "What is joy?" I would give you a blank stare. I had no idea what joy was.

One of the deepest impressions on my mind was the time I stood outside my parents' apartment, and saw airplanes flying over. I saw the bombs coming down right before my eyes,

killing three thousand people! Three thousand who had suffered so much already. Three thousand who had nothing to do with the war. All they wanted was to live in peace. So if you had asked me, “What’s there to be happy about?” I wouldn’t be able to answer you. What is the meaning of life? Why must we forever kill each other? These wretched people who had barely enough to eat, were being bombed to death, or were maimed and blinded. Isn’t it hard enough for them to live as it is without the bombing?

### **Joy: God’s power saves from sin**

The first time I understood the ultimate cause of all these troubles was when I came to understand the gospel through God’s grace. It was sin that caused man to behave like this. The world will never become better until sin is removed. But sin is so powerful. How can we ever fight against sin? We are all slaves of sin. The leaders of this world are all slaves of sin. How can they ever free themselves from the problem of sin? You can sit in the United Nations all day and discuss the problems of a sinful world, but you won’t be able to solve them. There will always be war in this world as long as there are human affairs. That is why there are robberies, murders, and rapes being committed every day. These sins will go on forever until humankind is saved from sin and changed by God’s power to become new people. Only God’s power can achieve that.

I don’t understand why some people are spreading slander about me, saying that I preach salvation by works. God is my witness: When have I ever taught such a thing? How can you

ever save yourself from sin through works? There is no way you can do this! No one in his right mind can preach a gospel like that. That would not be the gospel. Only God's power can save us, so I appeal to every one of you to experience the power of God the Savior. That is the first step.

Then you will know joy—the joy of the new wine of the gospel that God freely gives you, because you can never make that wine yourself. Then you will know the joy of the new clothing, the garment of salvation. You can smile at the storm. Why are you afraid of the storm? I have nothing to be afraid of because my God is the God of heaven and earth. I pray that each of us may know this joy and experience the new wine.



## Chapter 5



# THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Matthew 13:3–9; 18–23 and Luke 8:4–8; 11–15  
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**T**oday we begin our study of the parables of the Lord Jesus in Matthew chapter 13. But I will begin not with the first parable in Matthew 13, the Parable of the Sower, but with its parallel passage in Luke chapter 8, which is also the Parable of the Sower.

The Lord Jesus taught in parables, and we have over 30 parables in the New Testament. By God's grace, I will be expounding the parables systematically week by week until we go through these precious parables of the Lord.

We begin with what we call the "foundation parable," namely, the Parable of the Sower. This parable is extremely rich, and today I aim to bring out one particular point to establish our understanding of this parable as we go along. The

parable is found in Luke 8:4–8, with its explanation given in verses 11–15. This parable is one of the only two parables for which the Lord Jesus gives an explanation. He gives this particular parable to teach his disciples how to understand parables in general. In my next message, we will consider why he uses parables at all, and whether parables are meant to help us understand something or to conceal something.

Let us read the parable in Luke 8:4–8,

And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: “A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.” As he said these things, he called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Luke 8:4–8, ESV)

That is the parable itself. Then in verses 11–15, the Lord explains the meaning of the parable:

Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard. Then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in

time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience. (Luke 8:11–15, ESV)

We see from Mark 4:13 that this parable is a foundation parable, for Jesus says, “If you don’t understand this parable, how will you understand all the parables?” Therefore the Parable of the Sower comes forth as the first of the parables in all the Synoptic Gospels.

## **The meaning of the Parable of the Sower**

What does the parable teach? The Lord Jesus says that a sower went out to sow some seed. This picture is very familiar to an agricultural country. As you walk around, you will see farmers sowing seed in the fields. The farmer carries a seed bag, a pouch which he hangs around his shoulders in front, and from which he takes a handful of seed and flings it forth. He scatters the seed in an arching motion across the field. He walks back and forth, and scatters the seed as he goes.

As he scatters the seeds, some fall on the path which is like hardened ground, having been compacted by the weight of the people who walk back and forth on it. The seeds that fall on this hardened ground are unable to enter the soil, so they lie on the surface. Wherever the farmer sows, a flock of birds would

follow, waiting to pick up the odd seed. The birds eat the seeds which have fallen on the path but have not gone into the soil.

The Lord then speaks of another category of seed that does fall into the soil, but the soil is shallow. After the rain comes and the soil covers the seed, the seed begins to grow quickly. But there is rock below, and as the root grows, it stops at the rock. There is a limit to how far the root can go down when it encounters rock; it cannot go further down to get enough moisture and nutrients, and the seed dies.

There is a third category of seed which is sown into the ground but the soil is not pure because it contains thorn seeds which are not yet visible. After a time, as Luke tells us, the thorn seeds grow together with the wheat seeds. The roots of the thorns become entangled with the roots of the young wheat plant, choking the wheat plant from the nutrients it needs. So this new plant dies or becomes unfruitful.

Finally, there are the seeds that fall on the good soil. They are those “who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience” (Luke 8:15), “yielding a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold, and some thirtyfold” (Matthew 13:8).

## **The seed: The Word of God, the Word of the Kingdom**

There is a simple key to understanding the parable. The Lord Jesus makes it plain that the seed is firstly the Word of God. The seed is also described as “the word of the kingdom” in

Matthew 13:19. The word “kingdom” means God’s rule, God’s government, God’s will. God’s kingdom is wherever God’s will is done, as Jesus says in Matthew 6:10, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” So God’s kingdom and God’s will are the same, for God’s kingdom is where God’s will is done. The “word of the kingdom” is the message that calls people to submit their lives to God. Nothing is more important in life than submitting to the will of God in our relationship with Him.

Preaching the Word of God—the seed—is therefore preaching God’s kingdom, and preaching about living under God’s sovereignty. If you don’t live under God’s kingship, you are not a Christian in the true Biblical sense. Any preacher who does not teach that every true Christian is one who lives under God’s will is not preaching the Word of God faithfully. If we preach salvation simply as, “Come to Jesus, and you will have peace and joy,” that is not preaching the Word of God. We must first and foremost preach, “Let Christ be the Lord of your life. Imitate him in the way he lived under God’s kingship and the way he did God’s will all through his life.” That is preaching the gospel.

If you live under God’s kingship, you will have inner peace and joy. But there will also be tribulation, persecution and suffering, as we will see in a moment. Any preacher who fails to mention this is unfit to preach the gospel, for he is not preaching the gospel as God meant it to be preached. We are not here to tell people what they want to hear, but to tell them the truth. The truth is not always what you want to hear. This

is true in other areas such as medicine. Nobody likes to hear about being sick or dying, but a doctor has to tell you the truth.

## **The sower: anyone who speaks the Word of God**

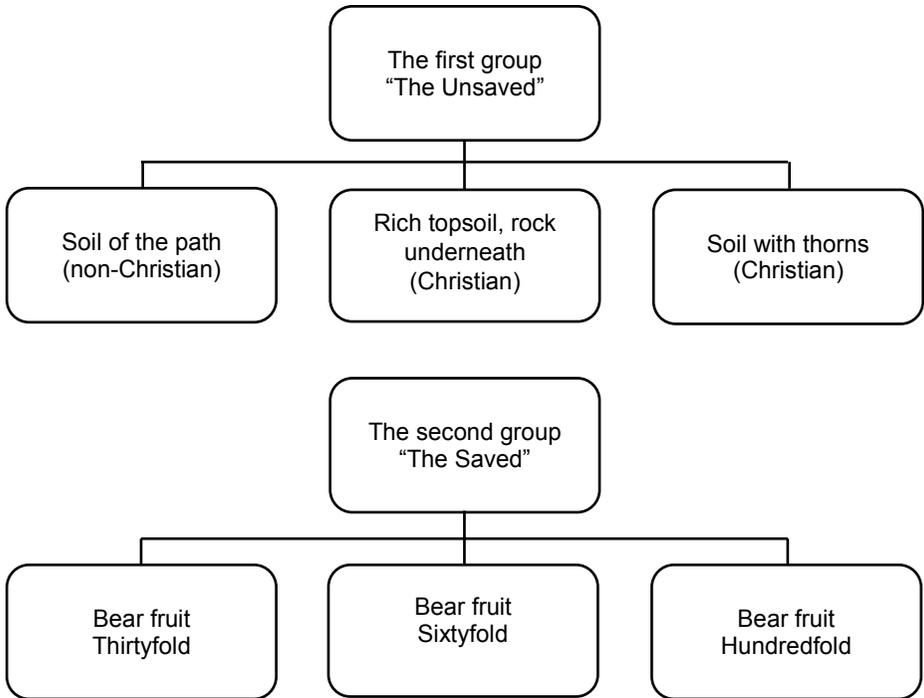
The Lord Jesus is, in the first instance, the sower who proclaims the Word; and we too are sowers if we proclaim that Word. Whenever you are witnessing to a friend or speaking the Word of God to others, you are sowing the seed as did the disciples in Matthew 10:7. It is not only the pastor but also the preacher who is a sower.

## **The soil: the attitude of the heart**

If the seed is the Word of God, and the sower is the preacher, what then is the soil that receives the seed? Jesus compares the heart of a person to the soil on which the seed is sown. We see in Matthew 13:19 that the seed, the word of the kingdom, is sown in people's heart. In describing the different types of soil, the parable is talking about the different attitudes of the heart.

Even then, no Christians or non-Christians are exactly alike. Never assume that their heart attitudes are exactly the same. Every heart is as unique as a face, hence every response to the gospel is unique and personal.

In this parable, there are two main groups of people, and each group in turn has three categories, as shown in the following diagram.



## The “Unsaved” group

We now turn our attention to the first group, the “Unsaved” group, which in turn consists of three categories—namely, one category of unbelievers and two categories of believers—but all three categories are unsaved. Contrary to what Jesus teaches, many churches say that the “Unsaved” group consists only of non-Christians, not Christians. But I am here to exegete the Word of God, not church doctrine, so we must be open to God’s Word, the basis of all truth. We now examine the three different categories that fall under the “Unsaved” group.

## **The first category rejects the gospel**

The first category of the unsaved consists of those people who are compared to the path on which the seeds fell but could not enter because the soil had been hardened. This category represents those whose hearts are hardened against God. When you preach the gospel to them, it is like going up the Rocky Mountains and trying to plant wheat in the rocks. The people in this category are adamant in their rejection of the gospel; their hearts are hardened against it. They don't want to listen to the Word of God. Or if they do listen, it is with the intention of mocking it. They trample the gospel underfoot. The gospel is utterly unable to penetrate their hearts. They don't believe the gospel at all.

## **The second category is superficial "Christians"**

The second category of the unsaved is not like this at all. On the surface, their hearts are very receptive to the gospel. The Lord Jesus compares their hearts to the rich topsoil with rocks underneath. You can describe such people as superficial. And because they respond quickly to the gospel, they are a great problem to the church, though a delight to a certain type of evangelist. These people raise their hands quickly at evangelistic meetings and without a struggle. You see in Matthew 13:20–21 that the ones with rock underneath are those who, when they hear the Word, receive it immediately with joy, but they have no firm root; "they had no depth" (v.5).

They receive the gospel with joy, saying, "Hallelujah! This is wonderful!" And you think, "What tremendous Christians!

Look at them! They receive God's Word with joy!" When the preacher says, "Raise your hands if you decide to come to God," their hands shoot up like a rocket. When the preacher says, "Come forward!" they rush to the front. They are the ones who get counted in the statistics for evangelistic crusades. Don't get me wrong. I am not saying that everybody who raises his hand at an evangelistic meeting is of this type. But the problem is that this kind of person tends to be in the great majority.

Yet there are also many who raise their hands at meetings, who go forward in fear and trembling, and who remain steady in Christ to the end. We must not overlook this type. I have seen many such people come to God with tears and in fear and trembling. This kind is more steady, but I am afraid of the other type who just rushes forward.

The people in the second category have no depth. They receive the Word of God immediately and grow faster than anyone else. Soil specialists tell us the rocks underneath provide extra warmth, which makes the seed germinate faster. The seed shoots up fast, so you say, "What a wonderful Christian he is!" But if you are familiar with God's Word, don't get too excited yet. Time will tell whether there is deep root in the plant or not.

What we see in this category is a superficial person. There is a spiritual response, but it is not deep enough. In his heart there is a basic resistance and hardness towards the Word of God. He commits himself to God up to a point, but he is not totally committed. That is why I have constantly warned you that the

Biblical faith that saves is an unconditional and total commitment, for if it is not total, it means that you have drawn a line somewhere at a point that only you would know. Maybe you don't even know where that line is. But one of these days, your root will hit that rock below and stop there, and the plant will die.

Those of us who have served God long enough have seen too many cases of spiritual collapse, too many for our liking. The majority will collapse. I would like you to examine your own heart. Is the response you made to God unconditional? Or have you drawn the line somewhere in your heart and said, "I'm going to be a good Christian. I'll go to church and be active. I'll serve enthusiastically in the young people's group, but I'll draw the line there. I won't let the Word of God do any more than this."? Oh, such people are very active, but in their hearts, they have drawn the line beyond which they will not go. If you push a rod into the ground, you will hit the rock somewhere, and it will stop. The roots of the wheat plant won't go far down because the soil is shallow.

What we notice about this second category is that they do believe, and are properly categorized as "Christians". They are the kind of people who, after having received the Word of God, will get baptized. They really do believe, but Luke 8:13 says that "they believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away."

They do believe! In the light of the Scriptural evidence, how could anyone teach that once you believe, you are always saved? This teaching completely bewilders me the more I study the

Scriptures. We are told in the Lord's own words that they believe for a while and fall away. They are finished!

Don't be misled by those who invent doctrines and theories that are contrary to God's Word. Don't confidently say to yourself, "I'm okay now, I have believed, I have been baptized." What if you belong to this very category? You believe; you are baptized; you are fervent for a time; but when tribulation comes, you fall away. I pray to God that none of you will be in this category. This is the second category: they believe, but for a while.

### **The third category is double-minded "Christians"**

The third category of the unsaved is entirely different from the first two. Their hearts are open to the Word of God. There is no rock in the soil at all. The soil is good and deep. So what is the problem?

When the Word of God is sown, they receive it into their hearts, just like the second category. There is no statement in any of the three synoptic Gospels that the third category receives the Word "with joy." It is remarkable how precise the Lord's teaching is. He reserves the words "with joy" only for the second category. The third category is not like this. Their roots go deeper, and they don't make a superficial response.

They receive the Word of God with hesitation, trembling, and maybe a struggle. Maybe they came forward in an evangelistic meeting with weeping and trembling. Their heart is open to God, and have no reservation about receiving the Word of God. But there are other things in the heart, such that the heart

is not pure in its devotion and commitment to God. They have not removed the seeds of other things from their hearts. So whereas the Word of God does grow in them, and they do make a definite response, these “other things” (Mark 4:19) come along and choke them, and they cannot grow.

That is the great tragedy of this third category. They fail to take into account the words of the Lord Jesus, “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt. 6:24, Lk. 16:13). You cannot serve God and idols. You cannot serve God and the world. Have you made up your mind about this? Do you know where you stand? Is your heart pure with God?

The Lord Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount that if your eye is not single, you are going to suffer from double vision, and the light that is in you will be darkness. And if the light in you is darkness, “how great is that darkness” (Mt. 6:22–23). You cannot survive if your eye is not singly fixed on God: you look at God and at the same time look at the world, at idols, at the pleasures of life. To survive, you have to be unconditionally and totally committed to God. There is no other way. Look at your own heart before God.

Notice that the parable doesn’t say that their hearts are full of sins. They receive the gospel. They do love the church. They do love the Word of God. But the problem is that they love God *plus* this, love God *plus* that, and love God *plus* the other thing. And once you don’t love God with all your heart, you won’t survive.

Mark 4:19 tells us that in this third category, the Word of God is choked by these “other things”. This is worrying. I have

seen many Christians who started out well, who seem to have great depth, whose responses are not superficial, yet they lack single-mindedness and single-heartedness. You cannot survive like that.

## Two of the “Unsaved” categories are Christians

The three categories of the unsaved group are different from one another. Of the three categories, only the first one consists of unbelievers, those who have never accepted the Word of God. The other two categories accept the Word of God, but “they believe for a while and fall away” (Luke 8:13).

In Scripture, the Greek word for “fall away” has a sense of finality. This Greek word *aphistēmi* is also used in 1 Timothy 4:1: the Holy Spirit says expressly that in the last days, “some will depart from the faith.” The Greek word translated “depart” is the same Greek word which is translated “fall away” in Luke 8:13 and Hebrews 3:12.

Let us read Hebrews 3:12, which is an important verse because it is addressed to Christians:

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.

Why does the writer to the Hebrews tell his readers about “an evil, unbelieving heart”? What is an evil heart? Here “evil” does not mean committing murder or robbery. Christians normally

would not think of doing that. The heart is “unbelieving” in the sense of not letting God rule in your heart as King in your life. It is evil because not allowing God to be King in your life is an act of rebellion and a rejection of God’s sovereignty. The result is a falling away from the living God.

The same Greek word is translated “depart” in Luke 13:27 to express utter rejection: “I do not know you; *depart* from me, all you evildoers.” There it is. Notice that the Lord Jesus is speaking to those who profess to be Christians. Yet they reject God in their hearts by the kind of life they live, even if not necessarily with their mouths.

When these two categories of “Christians” in the unsaved group fall away, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they leave the church, though that could happen too. Some will still go to church, because if you have been going to church for many years, it becomes a habit. You wouldn’t feel right if you don’t go to church. Or you might not know what to do on Sunday morning or afternoon if you don’t spend an hour or two in church. But going to church hides the true condition of the heart. Their hearts have turned away from God. They have rejected God’s kingdom in their hearts. God’s will is no longer central to them. They rush out after church to play *mahjong* or card games, or place their bets on race horses or dogs.

The three categories of the unsaved fall away in one way or another. It is crucial to bear in mind that of the unsaved, only one category never believed at all. The other two categories are those who believed, perhaps “for a while,” as the Lord Jesus says in the parable.

## The “Saved” group has varying fruitfulness

The second group of people—those who are saved in contrast to the unsaved—likewise fall into three categories: those bearing fruit thirtyfold, those sixtyfold, and those a hundredfold (Mt. 13:23). We see that the parable is perfectly balanced between the three unsaved categories and the three saved categories.

Those in the second group—the saved—bring forth fruit, but they vary in their fruitfulness. The main difference lies in the quality. It is the same seed, but the seed produces different results in different soils. The Word of God that you heard is the same Word of God that John Wesley heard. So why are you not a John Wesley? The Word of God that you heard is the same Word that John Sung heard. So why are you not a John Sung? He reads the same Bible as you, and has the same Holy Spirit as you, so why are you different from him? What makes the difference?

One person yields a hundredfold, another only thirtyfold, less than one-third. Where is the difference? The difference lies in the soil, in the quality of your response to God. You need only read the writings of people like John Sung and John Wesley to see the quality of their response. It is of a different quality from the responses of other Christians, so they experience God’s power working through them in greater measure. That ought to be a challenge for us. Always bear in mind that the Word of God that you hear is the same Word of God that produced an apostle Paul, that produced a John Wesley or a George Whitefield—spiritual giants—yet it also produces

spiritual dwarfs! One produces a hundredfold, another thirtyfold. It is not the fault of God's Word, or the fault of the Spirit of God, that you are not a John Wesley. What matters is the different quality of response, the different richness of the heart.

What kind of Christian are you? On that Day, will you stand before the Lord Jesus with nothing to show except mediocrity? If there is no fruit, there will be no salvation. The Lord has made this plain in John 15:6: You may be a branch, but if a branch does not bear fruit, it will be cut off and thrown into the fire. He makes it exceedingly explicit.

Ask before God, "What kind of soil is my heart in relation to God's Word? How responsive am I?" Don't think that it is spiritually modest to say, "Okay, I'll settle for thirtyfold." That is not modesty! You are hindering the full power of God's Word when that seed could have produced a hundredfold, but you limited it to thirty. What excuse do you have? Learn to say, "Lord, here I am in all my weaknesses and all my failings, but let the power be of You, not of me. May You have full sway in my life! Accomplish Your purpose in me! Grant that I may not hinder the full potential of Your Word in any way."

## **Key to fruitfulness: endurance in suffering**

Let us consider further a basic point: What makes the difference between these two groups, the unsaved and the saved? This is the one point I would like to establish in your mind today, because it is the difference between surviving and not

surviving, the difference between becoming spiritually mighty and falling away completely.

What is the key to the difference between the two groups? It centers on one thing: *whether you grasp the meaning of suffering and are willing to endure it*. This will make all the difference. At this moment, you might not fully comprehend what I have just said, but I would like you to think about it for a moment.

In some Bibles (KJV, RSV, ESV), the final word of Luke 8:15 is “patience.” This is not a good translation because the original word in the Greek text means *endurance* (as in NET, NRSV).

Here is the key. Even if you don’t remember the parable in detail, you do well to remember this one word: “endurance” (or “patience,” confusingly translated). The Greek word for “endurance” does not mean that you sit patiently waiting for something to happen. It means the ability to stand under stress.

Today we are not spending a lot of time on the first category of the “unsaved” group because they have never accepted the Word of God in the first place. We are concerned with the other two categories who accepted the Word of God, who became “believers” (by the church’s definition of believing), but they believed only for a while and then collapsed. They collapsed because they couldn’t take the stress. Maybe they became Christians because some preacher stood on the platform and said, “Come to God, and you’ll have peace and joy,” and then offered them a lollipop. Who wouldn’t want to accept a lollipop?

That is not the way the Lord Jesus preached. He tells us it is no easy thing to be a Christian. You have to be able to stand the

pressure. The Gospels are explicit about this. And when Paul preached the gospel, he never dished out lollipops, as we see in Acts 14:22: “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

I thank God for preachers who had been honest with me about this. I have had enough of people who dish out lollipops. When everything goes wrong for you, you’ll say, “Hey, what is happening to me? Why did everything go wrong when I became a Christian?” That is right! When you become a Christian, you will find that everything starts going wrong. That is the way you know whether you are a Christian. If you thought that everything will be sweet for you, you have not yet understood the Bible. Paul says, “through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God.”

The Lord Jesus says the same: When the seed is sown, three things will happen as described by the following three words. The first word is “tribulation,” and the second is “persecution.” Both words appear in Matthew 13:21 and Mark 4:17. The third is “temptation,” which appears in Luke 8:13. We now examine these three things: tribulation, persecution, and temptation. Each will put tremendous pressure on you.

## Three kinds of suffering

### 1. Tribulation (pressure)

In fact the Greek word for “tribulation” (*thlipsis*) means pressure (cf. CSB). To be in tribulation means to be under

pressure. This is true not only in terms of definition, but also in the practical realities of the Christian life. This Greek word is also used in Acts 14:22: “through many *tribulations* we must enter the kingdom of God”.

You are going to be under pressure all the time. That is what the word “tribulation” means. I am sure that those who just got baptized are already beginning to discover some pressure, right? If you haven’t yet felt the pressure, it will probably come soon. But if it doesn’t come soon, I worry for you as to whether you know what it is to be a Christian.

But what is the attitude of a true Christian? What does Paul say in Romans 5:3–5? You need to keep his words in mind if you are going to be a true Christian:

More than that, **we rejoice in our sufferings**, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.  
(Romans 5:3–5, RSV)

Notice that “we rejoice in our sufferings.” The Greek word *thlipsis* here translated “sufferings” is the same word translated “tribulation” elsewhere. The phrase means “we rejoice in being under pressure.”

Does that reflect your thinking? Today the church is full of people who become Christians to collect lollipops or have a good life. No wonder this kind of Christian will start grumbling as soon as the pressures come. When the weight begins to crush

on them, they will say, “What’s going on?” Well, what’s going on is that you have become a Christian. If a preacher doesn’t tell you that you are going to be under pressure the moment you become a Christian, he shouldn’t be preaching the gospel. Evangelists who seek numbers and decisions give me much trouble. After getting decisions from the people, they have no more concern for them. That is where pastors have to take over and sort out the mess. What happens is that people come to me and say, “Why is everything around me going wrong? My father got sick, my mother got into financial trouble, and my business is not doing well. I have problems here and there. What’s going on?”

If you knew what it is to be a Christian, you would rejoice with Paul who says, “More than that, we rejoice in our tribulations!” You might wonder what’s happening with Paul? Is he asking for trouble? No, he understands what the Christian life is like: being under pressure all the time. Remember that you are called to suffer! And thank God for that pressure. Learn to say with Paul, “I rejoice!” We rejoice in the suffering and the pressures we have to bear.

## 2. Persecution

The second word is “persecution” (*diōgmos*). You wouldn’t be much of a Christian if you have never endured some persecution, the worst of which is persecution from fellow Christians. Don’t be upset when those who persecute you are the religious Christians. I have constantly pointed out that those who persecuted the Lord Jesus the most were the Pharisees, the most

religious of the Jews; and the scribes, who are the theologians; and the chief priests, who are the religious leaders.

John Wesley, a mighty servant of God, was persecuted by his fellow Christians. To be sure, he was also persecuted by non-Christians, but it was the Christians who persecuted him the most. He was thrown out of the Church of England, of which he was a member. He was not allowed to preach in any Church of England because he preached holiness, and the Church didn't want to hear any of that. Wesley had to preach on the streets because he was not allowed to preach in any church. But thanks be to God, it was through Wesley that a mighty revival came to England, and left its mark in history in a way that no other revival did. Wesley knew he was going to be persecuted, yet he bore no ill will against those who persecuted him. Today the Church of England regrets what they had done to John Wesley, and are trying to get the Methodist Church back.

Remember this: Those who serve God will face persecution. If you are faithful to the gospel, you will face persecution from fellow Christians as well as from non-Christians. You will sometimes wonder to yourself, "How come the whole world is my enemy?"

Paul says to Timothy:

Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my **persecutions**, my sufferings, what befell me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra, what **persecutions** I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed all who desire to

live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be **persecuted**. (2 Tim. 3:10–12, RSV)

When you become a Christian, understand that you are going to suffer persecution. If you don't want to suffer, don't be a Christian in the first place.

### 3. Temptation: testing, temptation to sin

The third word is “temptation,” which we see in Luke 8:13. The Greek word *peirasmos*, which generally means temptation, has two meanings. The first is to be under God's testing or trial (sometimes it may be God who is testing you). The same Greek word is used in 1 Peter 4:12 in this sense of testing:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your **testing**, as though some strange thing were happening to you. (NASB)

In verse 14, Peter says,

If you are **reproached** for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. (RSV)

The Greek word *oneidizō* here translated “reproached” means, in this context, being tested through the suffering of reproach for the sake of Christ. The word “testing”—being under pressure, being tried in fire by God as it were—is very much a part of the Christian life. You will be tested.

The second meaning of *peirasmos* (“temptation”) is to be tempted to sin. It comes directly from Satan’s involvement and activity. He entices you to sin, and shows you the pleasures of sin. In Luke 4:13, Satan tries to tempt the Lord Jesus to sin and turn away from God, so that he may fall:

And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time. (ESV)

From the three words that Jesus uses—*tribulation*, *persecution*, *temptation*—we can see why those sown on the rocky ground collapsed. It also shows that suffering is inseparable from the Christian life.

In the parable, when the sun came out, those in the rocky ground withered because they had no root and were unable to draw in moisture. The sun is compared to suffering. The sun can either destroy or cause growth. This point is crucial to an understanding of this parable. On the one hand, the sun is essential for plants to grow and bring forth fruit. On the other hand, the sun destroys those plants which have no roots. Tribulation, persecution and testing are like the sun. They will either deepen you spiritually or destroy you, depending on the kind of Christian you are.

### **Three problems in evading suffering**

Let us now look at the third category of the unsaved: those sown among the thorns, who believe and later fail. In this category, the seed was not sown into the thorns, for the thorns were not

there at the time the seed was sown. The thorns only sprang up later—“the thorns grew up with it” (Luke 8:7)—and choked the seed. Mark 4:18–19 says,

And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. (ESV)

As we just saw, Jesus mentions three things pertaining to the previous category, the rocky soil: stress, persecution, temptation. But in the present category, the thorny ground, Jesus uses three particular expressions: (1) the cares of the world, (2) the delight in riches, (3) the desire for other things. All these will prove fatal to the Christian who gives ground to the cares of this present age.

Consider how these problems could affect a Christian. A person who wants to evade suffering is the kind who wants to enjoy life. If you don't want to suffer, you will seek the delights of riches and the pleasures of the world. It is the means of escaping from suffering. This kind of person seeks refuge in the world, and are constantly anxious that they might not get what they want from the world.

So the thorny soil, representing those who believe yet fail, share a common mentality with the rocky soil, in that both are running away from pressure. The same basic mentality is behind both categories, though expressed differently. Why does a Christian love money? Because money can relieve stress and suffering. Indeed, a common form of suffering is financial

pressure. If you don't like being under financial pressure, you would seek money because it will buy you a nice car, a nice house, and other comforts of life.

You don't want to be persecuted, but to be respected and looked up to. How would that happen unless you have lots of money and live in style? What is more, if you are wealthy, it would be risky for others to persecute or slander you, because you can afford to hire lawyers to take them to court. Nobody dares to attack the rich, but everyone dares to attack the defenseless poor.

You seek many things when you have the means to buy them. The poor guy doesn't have the means; he can only dream about the nice stereo system he sees at the store window. But the rich man wants the world. He wants more money because it gives him the power to get what he wants. If he wants a holiday in Florida, he goes for one. Can you afford a luxury holiday in Florida? No, because you are not rich. You can only gaze at the photos of the yachts of Florida in a magazine, and say to yourself, "Ah! I wonder what it feels like over there!"

So this category tries to run away from suffering as far as possible, and take refuge in the world. Even if you understood the meaning of suffering, you might not be willing to accept suffering. The willingness to accept suffering, even to rejoice in it like Paul, makes all the difference between the group that survived and the group that did not.

## The value of suffering

### 1. Suffering is inevitable and necessary for the Christian

As we sum up the meaning of suffering, the first thing I would like you to notice is this: Suffering is inevitable for the Christian. The sun shines not only on the non-Christian but also the Christian. It shines on everyone. It will destroy a plant, but bring life to another. The plant that withered under the sun is not alone in getting the sunshine. The sun focuses not just on one point but shines everywhere. If it shines on the one that withered, it will also shine on the one that survived. It is pointless for those who failed to say, “I suffered more.” You didn’t suffer any more than anyone else. I guarantee that you have not suffered one-tenth of anything Paul had suffered for Christ.

The weak Christian grumbles every time something goes wrong: “Why is God doing this to me?” God is doing it to you because you need sunshine. No plant grows without sunshine. You must learn to endure. The seed that falls on the hard ground also gets sunshine, though it won’t have to worry about it because it won’t last for long.

The sun shines everywhere. In this world, there is no way for you to escape suffering and persecution. You can escape to some extent only to run into another set of troubles. The world is deceiving. It seems to give you something good, then it entangles you even more. In the end, you will also suffer, but in a different way.

In this life, there is no refuge from suffering, at least not for long. The wise Christian bears this in mind. He knows that the rich are not immune from suffering. The rich cannot sleep at night because they are anxious about being robbed or kidnapped for ransom. They worry about whether their banks and insurance companies will fail, or whether their stocks and shares will collapse. They worry about who will inherit their riches when they die, and whether the family will fight over the inheritance. There is no end to it. What is more, many have lost their health by the time they got rich. Some people sacrifice their health to gain wealth, and then after gaining wealth, they use it to get back their health.

## **2. Suffering destroys sin in your life**

If you are a wise Christian, you would see the second reason to rejoice in suffering: *suffering destroys sin in your life*. We see this in 1 Peter 4:1: “he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.”

This verse is important to understand. Suffering has a way of destroying the weeds in your life, right at the roots, if you allow the roots to be exposed to the sun. Suffering has a way of purifying your life. 1 Peter 1:6–7 says that the trial of your faith, like gold tested in fire, will make your faith ever purer.

In the parable, as the sun gets hotter, the more the plant will drive down its roots. Its spiritual life increases as it goes further down to draw the moisture and the nutrients it needs.

### **3. Suffering is a token of God's love**

Thirdly, suffering is a token of God's love. Sunshine is so beautiful! How can the sunshine that causes a plant to grow also destroy the plant that has no roots? But the plant with deep roots basks in the sunshine, and enjoys it. It grows wonderfully because of the sunshine. Sunshine expresses God's love for us. We see in Hebrews 12:10, for example, that God brings about suffering by disciplining us, in order "that we may share His holiness," and become like Him. Holiness is possible only through suffering. Hebrews 12:3–11 brings out the fact that God disciplines us because He loves us.

I discipline my child because I love my child. It expresses my love and my concern. I won't discipline my neighbor's child because that is not my responsibility, not even if the child does something bad like tearing down the family house. I don't say to this child, "Why are you tearing your house down?" If his parents don't stop him, why should I? But I am concerned about my own child. If my child does something like that, I will discipline my child. It will hurt him or her, and hurt me, but the suffering is the evidence of my love.

## **We are called into the fellowship of Jesus' sufferings**

More than that, we are called to participate in "the fellowship of his sufferings" (Phil. 3:10). You may think that something must have happened to me for me to say what I just said, but the Lord brings out the same principle: "If any man follows me,

let him take up his cross daily.” Do you want to follow Jesus? He carries his cross; you carry your cross. You follow him in “the fellowship of his sufferings.” That is so important to understand, and it means several things:

### **1. Suffering is the evidence you are Jesus’ disciple**

First, when you suffer, you are seen to be Jesus’ disciple who follows in his steps. 1 Peter 2:21 says that Christ left an example for us that we should follow in his steps. Therefore, when you suffer, that is the evidence you are a disciple of Jesus.

### **2. We glorify God and Christ in suffering**

Second, it shows that we honor Christ in our bodies. The apostle Paul glories in his suffering. In Philippians 1:20 he says, “It is my desire that Christ will be glorified in my body, whether by life or by death.” Where do we find such Christians today? Most so-called Christians want life, not death, but Paul says, “I am happy to die.” Paul pressed on towards Jerusalem when others tried to stop him. He had no fear of death because “Christ will be glorified in my death.” Paul knew that in his sufferings, he, as also Christ, will glorify God (John 12:27–28).

### **3. Understand God and Christ at the deepest level**

Third, it is only in suffering that we know God—and Christ—at the deepest level. There is one kind of Christian with whom you can fellowship at the deepest level. Such Christians, because they follow the Lord Jesus, learn to obey God, and

experience God in the school of suffering (Heb. 5:8). Christians who have suffered have a depth that no other Christians have. They don't just say, "I believe"; they know Christ at the deepest level. This kind of Christian is rare today.

If one day you ever have the privilege of meeting some of the faithful brothers and sisters in China, you will know what I mean. There is a special quality about the Christians who have gone through hard labor camps, sufferings, beatings and interrogations. They are unlike the Christians who go to church just for activities, for they know God in a special way.

This is what Paul longed for. He said, "Do you want to know God? Let me tell you how you can know Him: follow Jesus in the place of suffering."

You won't know God simply by studying at a seminary. Seminary is just a place to get academic qualifications, not a place to know God. No one from a seminary will ever know God like a Chinese brother or sister who has never seen the inside of a secondary school, but who has sat in a prison camp for following the Lord Jesus. When you talk to a person from a seminary—versus talking to a brother or sister who has suffered for Christ—you will find two persons worlds apart. I have talked with both types, and I know the difference: one knows God, the other only has head knowledge. Oh, that is a vast difference!

In any case, what kind of knowledge do you want to pick up? If it is theology, go to a Christian bookshop. Read a book on systematic theology, but that won't make you know God any better. Knowing God is acquired by suffering in the footsteps

of Jesus. That is why Paul says, “That I may know him ... and the fellowship of his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10). He puts these elements in one sentence because they are inseparable. You will know Christ when you follow him in suffering. That is when God his Father draws closest to you; that is when you need Him most; that is when God talks most clearly to you, just as God came closest to Jesus at his testing in the Garden of Gethsemane, and at his dying on the cross at Calvary.

I speak from experience. The three years in China when I faced hunger and a small measure of persecution, was when I walked in the sweetest, closest fellowship with God. It was through experiencing pressures in “the fellowship of his sufferings”—following in Jesus’ footsteps of suffering—that I came to know God most intimately. It was much more valuable than my time at Bible school or the Faculty of Divinity.

I hope all this will help you understand the meaning, the value, and the preciousness of suffering. You will never find God closer to you than when you are suffering, assuming that you have indeed put your roots deep down. Suffering can drive you away from God as has happened with the two categories of believers in the “unsaved” group. Or it can draw you closer to God, depending on the condition of your heart. If you are suffering, praise God for it, and say, “Now is my opportunity to draw very close to Him.”

So I say again, particularly to the newly baptized and those who are considering baptism, you will face a hard time either way. Either the world will tempt you with its attractions and say, “Leave behind the hardship of being a Christian, and come

over to our side!”—or, if you resist the temptation, you will face heavy pressure.

Stand firm by God’s empowering as you follow the Lord Jesus in suffering. You will then discover that God and Christ are standing shoulder to shoulder with you. You will know the sweetness of their fellowship, for they are right there with you in your suffering.

## **The highest suffering for the Lord’s sake is not given to everyone**

Finally, there is one category of suffering that I hardly dare mention, because this privilege of suffering is reserved only for the mighty ones whom God has chosen. Most of us are not even qualified for it. Jesus said that Saul (later Paul) “is a chosen instrument of mine ... I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Acts 9:15–16). Do you want to be a chosen instrument?

I have heard many say, “It’s not fair that Jesus chose Paul.” Do you know why he chose Paul? The reason is found in the words, “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake.” Do you want to suffer a great many things? You might be the next Paul. If the Lord chooses you, you are going to have the weight of a heavy cross upon you. Paul was the kind of person who gloried in tribulation.

Before Wang Ming-Dao went to prison, he constantly spoke about not being worthy to suffer for Christ. Maybe he had this very point in mind, that not everyone is granted the supreme

privilege of being called to suffer in this way. The Christians in China were aware of this privilege, and Wang Ming-Dao was finally given that privilege. He knew that suffering of this type is a privilege not given to everybody.

Do you see suffering for Christ's sake as a privilege? Is your heart open to the meaning of suffering? If it is, then you are going to be among those who will not only bring forth fruit, but bring forth fruit thirtyfold, sixtyfold, even a hundredfold.



## Chapter 6



# THE PURPOSE OF THE PARABLES

Matthew 13:10–17  
Montreal, July 16, 1978

Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

‘You will indeed hear but never understand,  
and you will indeed see but never perceive.  
For this people’s heart has grown dull,  
and with their ears they can barely hear,  
and their eyes they have closed,

lest they should see with their eyes  
and hear with their ears  
and understand with their heart  
and turn, and I would heal them.’

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.” (Matthew 13:10–17, ESV)

**W**e continue our systematic exposition of God’s Word in Matthew chapter 13. Today we study Matthew 13:10–17, a passage which is wedged in the Parable of the Sower. By “wedged” we mean that this passage is placed between the parable and its explanation. In this passage we see some important matters that we have to deal with, and if we fail to deal with them correctly, we will go on the wrong track in understanding God’s Word.

The parallels to today’s passage are found in Mark chapter 4 and Luke chapter 8, but we will not look at them because they are much shorter and have less content than this passage in Matthew.

## **To conceal or to reveal?**

I would like you to keep a number of questions in mind as we read this passage, Matthew 13:10–17. First, we ask the question that the disciples raised in verse 10: Why does the Lord Jesus

teach the people in parables? Then we can ask, What is the purpose of the parable? Is it to hide or to reveal the message of salvation? That is the crucial point. If the parable hides the message from some, is this God's intention to hide it in the first place?

We ask this question because it leads to the wider question, What is God's purpose for us? Does He want to save us or doesn't He? If the purpose of a parable is to conceal salvation, presumably God wouldn't want to save some of us. This answer may seem strange, but it is taught in certain theologies. In Calvinistic theology, a parable is designed to conceal rather than reveal, conveying judgment rather than grace. We will look at this in greater detail.

So the questions we need to ask are: Why did the Lord speak to the people in parables? Is salvation for everyone or not for everyone?

Let us read the first part of today's passage, in verses 10 and 11, in which the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks to the people in parables:

<sup>10</sup> Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" <sup>11</sup> And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. (Matthew 13:10–11, ESV)

Are these words of Jesus a statement of intention, or are they a statement of fact? There is a crucial difference between them. In other words, is it God's intention to give the kingdom to

some and not to others? If the answer is yes, this would fall in line with predestinarian doctrine which teaches that some are chosen to be saved, but others are not. So is this a statement of fact or a statement of intention? Is it that God's kingdom is given to you because you have received it, but not given to others because they have rejected it?

## **A preacher's error can cost people their eternal welfare**

Expounding God's Word takes clear thinking as well as accurate exposition. Any error along the line will result in the most serious consequences, more serious than any error you can make in any area of study in the world. An engineer's error in structural design could cause a bridge to collapse, with lives lost. But a mistake in expounding God's Word could cost people their eternal welfare. That awesome responsibility has never ceased to frighten me. But I proceed under the grace of God.

Let us read the rest of passage, Matthew 13:12-17:

For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: 'You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can

barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (Mt. 13:12–17, ESV)

This passage raises some important questions. Why did Jesus speak in parables? What reasons did he give for doing so? Whose hearts have grown dull? Would they be the people of Israel in the first place? Isaiah originally addressed these words to the nation of Israel which had closed its eyes.

We can see that the passage is not easy to understand. But precisely because it is not easy to understand, it contains great truths of great importance.

I now return to the question: When Jesus spoke to the people in parables, was it to hide salvation from them, or was it to reveal salvation? What is your answer to this question? If you say it was designed to reveal the truth to them, then you have taken a position contrary to predestinarianism and Calvinism. But if you say it was to conceal the truth from them, then you have taken the predestinarian position, according to which Jesus spoke a word of judgment, not of salvation, so that they would not understand. According to this doctrine, salvation was there but they could not see it, for the message of salvation is understood only by those to whom God has given eyes to perceive, and ears to hear; all the others were deliberately blinded.

What is the evidence for this? The evidence comes out in John 12:38–40, which quotes Isaiah 6:10.

...<sup>38</sup> so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”<sup>39</sup> Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said,<sup>40</sup> “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them. (John 12:38–40, ESV)

In verse 40, it is God who blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts so that they may not see or understand, thereby preventing them from turning to God for healing. John Calvin and his fellow predestinarians glory in this teaching. I don’t rejoice or glory in this teaching because I am about to refute it.

If Calvin is right in saying that God doesn’t you to be saved, I shall close my Bible right here and walk away from the pulpit, for I would have no message to preach. I don’t know why Calvin should preach, or why I should preach, if God doesn’t want people to turn to Him in repentance. If there are non-Christians here, I wouldn’t know the purpose of my preaching to you if the preaching is designed to conceal rather than reveal, at least for those who are perishing.

Before we rush to a conclusion, I praise God that the Word of God is not to be understood quite so superficially, and this is what I aim to expound. Let us look at this passage again, so that we may come to the right conclusions. I want to show you first the exposition, then the conclusion. I am sorry that I have

to refer to people like John Calvin or teachings such as predestinarianism. Much of what Calvin says is of great value. I am no enemy of Calvin, but I differ on this one point, and I will do this publicly and without apology. I want to show that his theological thinking is wrong, his exegesis is wrong, and I hope that my explanation will not be too difficult for you to understand.

As I said, if John Calvin is right, I would have no reason whatsoever to stand here and preach, since my preaching would be designed to conceal rather than reveal. If Jesus was concealing the truth from the multitudes, should I not follow him and do the same?

Was it Jesus' intention that their eyes be blinded? Did he indicate that this is also what God wants? I say this with deep regret because, to my mind, it is almost inconceivable that such exegesis could be preached today. To some Christians, theology is more important than people. I don't wish to have any part in this kind of religion, and I make no apology for saying so. If religion can glory in a God who chooses certain people to be consigned to hell, who blinds people, who deafens their ears and hardens their hearts, I don't want to be a minister of that sort of religion. I thank God that this is not the God of the Bible. Never take Scripture out of context, as many have done.

Calvin makes great use of this particular passage, John 12:38–40, in his work, *The Eternal Predestination of God*. I read the relevant section again just yesterday, to refresh my mind on what he says, and I could agree on nothing except one point: he

acknowledges that the people sinned first. But I cannot agree that God has chosen to harden their hearts arbitrarily.

## Man's heart is hardened—Who is responsible?

### The Greek and Hebrew texts of Isaiah 6:9-10 are different

Let us now turn to God's Word, and see what the Lord Jesus actually says. We turn again to Matthew 13:14–15, which is a quotation of Isaiah 6:9–10:

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: "You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. <sup>15</sup> For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and **their eyes they have closed**, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them." (Matthew 13:14–15, ESV)

Now we look at John 12:40 which also quotes Isaiah 6:

**"He has blinded their eyes** and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them." (John 12:40, ESV)

You may wonder why Matthew and John both quote Isaiah 6, yet arrive at different conclusions. In Matthew's passage, it is the people who close their own eyes, but in John's passage, it is God who closes their eyes. See the words in boldface above.

What accounts for the difference? The answer is that John 12:40 quotes Isaiah from the Hebrew Bible, but Matthew 13:14–15 quotes Isaiah from the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament translated from the Hebrew Old Testament) with no change in tense or wording, apart from a few tiny variations. The Septuagint translators softened the tone of the Hebrew Old Testament, for fear that the statement would be misunderstood by those who are untrained in the Bible. This is accepted by Matthew, who quotes the Septuagint version.

When you read Matthew's version, you will notice that there is no ascription to God of hardening anyone's heart or blinding anyone's eyes. There is no statement that God did any of these things to them. The responsibility is placed fully and squarely upon the people of Israel for closing their eyes to God's truth. Hence the Isaiah passage in the Septuagint is a statement of fact rather than of intention.

Let us turn to Isaiah 6:8–10 and see what it says. The following are two English translations. The first one is based on the Hebrew Old Testament; the second is based on the Septuagint (from a modern and scholarly translation, *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*):

<sup>8</sup> And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send

me.”<sup>9</sup> And he said, “Go, and say to this people: ‘Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive.’<sup>10</sup> Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and **shut their eyes**; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” (Isaiah 6:8-10, RSV)

<sup>8</sup> Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom should I send, and who will go to this people?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”<sup>9</sup> And he said, “Go, and say to this people: ‘You will listen by listening, but you will not understand, and looking you will look, but you will not perceive.’<sup>10</sup> For this people’s heart has grown fat, and with their ears they have heard heavily, and **they have shut their eyes** so that they might not see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.” (Isaiah 6:8-10, *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*)

Notice the words in boldface. In the first passage from the Hebrew OT, it is God who shuts their eyes. In the second passage from the Greek OT, it is the people who close their own eyes. Verse 10 is where we see the key difference. In the Hebrew Bible, the prophet Isaiah, as God’s servant and instrument, was told to make the heart of the people fat, to make their ears heavy, and to shut their eyes—as seen in John 12:40 which quotes this. But in the Greek Old Testament, their spiritual condition is presented as a description of fact, with people shutting their own eyes, as reflected in Matthew 13:14–15. How then do we understand this?

## **1. Isaiah chapter 6 cannot be isolated from chapters 1 to 5**

Let me put the matter to you simply: The matter is resolved when we look at the first five chapters of Isaiah, since they form the background to Isaiah 6. We cannot isolate Isaiah chapter 6 from its context, Isaiah chapters 1 to 5. These chapters precede and explain chapter 6.

In chapter 6, Isaiah the great prophet had a vision of God, and God sent him forth: “Go and speak to this people. Make their heart fat (slow of spiritual understanding), make their ears heavy (unable to hear the message), and shut their eyes (to prevent them from perceiving spiritual truth).” Why? When you read the first five chapters of Isaiah, you will see why. *The people had already shut their own eyes*, being unwilling to see the truth, and were responsible for hardening their own hearts. We don’t have time to survey chapters 1 to 5 today, which you can read at home. But that is the background to, and the reason behind the Greek translation of Isaiah 6:9–10 which is quoted in Matthew 13:14–15.

## **2. The truth will close your eyes, ears, hearts**

The book of Isaiah is often called “the Gospel of Isaiah” because in it, the coming of Christ—the Messiah—is so fully portrayed.

So how does Isaiah make the heart of the people dull, as commanded by God? If God had given you the instruction, “Go and preach the gospel, but shut the eyes of the people, close their ears, and make their hearts dull,” how will you do it? The answer is not guesswork; it appears right before us in Isaiah,

and is the key to a correct exposition. Did Isaiah obey God's instruction to shut the eyes of the people? He certainly did! But how did he do it?

How do you go out and block the hearts of the people? Think about it. If you were assigned this job today, how will you do it? If I were given this job as Isaiah was given this job, what would I do to block your heart? Do I punch you in the chest to block your heart valve? Do I cover your eyes with my hands so that you cannot see? Do I stick my fingers into your ears so that you cannot hear? You will say, "That's ridiculous!" Of course it is! But how then are we going to do it? Think, brothers and sisters, before you conclude that God wants the people to perish, that He selects only a small group to save and lets the others perish.

How exactly do you shut people's ears and blind their eyes? How did Isaiah do it? *He simply proclaimed the truth.* How else can you do this task? You may say, "I have lost you." Follow me for a moment, and it won't be hard to understand. And when you understand it, it will turn out to be amazing!

God's truth will do one of two things in everyone's life. The truth will either open your eyes or blind your eyes. God's truth will either open your ears or close your ears. God's truth will either make you alive or kill you. The truth does all this. When I preach God's truth, some people close their ears, but others open their hearts. When I preach the message of Christ, some are going to live, some are going to die. Every preacher should understand this.

When I preach to a people who are like the Israelites, a stiff-necked and rebellious nation, I don't have to do anything to close their eyes: they will simply resist the truth. God said to Ezekiel, "But the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me. Because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart. Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces, and your forehead as hard as their foreheads." (Ezekiel 3:7–8, ESV)

## **God is not willing that any should perish**

God is not willing that any should perish, a truth that Calvin denies. Calvin says that it is God's will that some should perish, for there is no other way to understand this. I abhor this teaching! I have stated before and state again that God is simply not willing that any should perish even though He knows that the people will reject His Word. He sent one servant after another to proclaim the message to them.

That is seen in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants in the Vineyard (Mt. 20:1–16). After the tenants killed the first servant, another servant is sent to them by the owner, who represents God in the parable. Why send another? If they killed the first one, they will kill the next one. It is because God is not willing that they should perish. Last of all, He sent His own son, and they killed him too.

In Matthew 23:37, Jesus echoes the heart of his God and Father when he says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often

would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, **and you would not!**” (ESV) The Lord Jesus was not willing that any should perish, but wanted to gather us under his wings.

Once we understand this, we will understand how God can blind people simply by speaking the truth. That is all we have to do. Do you now see how John 12:40 reads entirely differently when you understand this principle of God’s Word? Light can give you sight or it can blind you. Light blinded Paul before it gave him sight. It is not just darkness that blinds, light can blind too. It is important to grasp this truth.

God sent Isaiah to make the heart of the people dull. How? Simply by preaching the truth, though God knew that they will not receive it. If He knew they will reject the gospel, why preach it? Because He was not willing that any should perish. That is the whole point! In Isaiah 65:2 are the beautiful words:

I have spread out My hands all day long to a rebellious people, Who walk in the way which is not good, following their own thoughts. (Isaiah 65:2, NASB)

Why did God bother to stretch out His hands to a stiff-necked people? Because He was not willing that they should perish.

Do you understand it? God does not want you to perish. I have said before and say again, nobody enters hell unless he goes past Jesus’ nail-pierced hands. Jesus stands at the gates of hell and blocks them with his nail-pierced hands, and says, “I beg you not to enter.” He is not willing that any should perish, because that is his Father’s will.

Now you can see how dangerous is the superficial and inaccurate exposition of the Word that takes a passage like John 12:40 and says, “Aha! God wants you to perish, so He blinds your eyes.” Before you jump to this conclusion, ask how does God blind your eyes? Simply by speaking the truth. God’s truth is hard to swallow, and many reject it, as a Chinese proverb brings out well: “Truthful words are hard to the ears, good medicine is bitter to your taste” (忠言逆耳,良藥苦口). We may know that something is the truth, but we don’t like it.

That is why I have always urged you as Christians to love the truth, and love it to the end. We can establish firmly and without question, and with a solid Scriptural basis, that God is unwilling that any should perish. This is confirmed by the apostle Peter:

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:9, ESV)

## **What gives Calvinism its plausibility?**

What gives Calvinism its plausibility on predestination? By quoting verses like John 12:40 to those who are not equipped to understand it, thus creating a *prima facie* situation. Every lawyer knows that a statement may appear to show one side on the face of it, but turns out to be quite the opposite after you examine it. This can also happen in Scripture, that things are not always what they seem to be.

What gives plausibility to the Calvinistic predestinarian doctrine is that it concentrates on one point, and one point only: the will of God. In analyzing predestination teaching, you only have to understand this one thing: the whole focus is on God's will, regarding which the Bible has a lot to say. It sounds convincing until you see two things that are not Scriptural about this teaching of God's will.

### **First error: God's will is sovereign, overriding His love and His holiness**

This error emphasizes God's will to the neglect of His holiness and His love. In predestination teaching, neither God's holiness nor God's love counts for much, for they are sacrificed to a doctrine of God's will. I have no time to expound this in detail except to put it in simple terms: In this teaching, whether God saves or doesn't save a person, has nothing to do with His love or His holiness, but is entirely a matter of His will. "I choose to save you whether you are a sinner or not." You may be a dreadful sinner, but God chooses to save you simply because it is His will. Or you may be a good person, but God doesn't choose to save you. His will is all that matters. That is Calvinism in its essence.

They don't deny His holiness or His love, but they don't focus much on them. But God can hardly be spoken of as a God of love when He is willing to let the majority perish. But they don't worry about that because they talk about the sovereignty of God's will. God does whatever He likes. A thing is right by the fact that God wills to carry it out. There is no other standard

of right or wrong. They don't ask whether right or wrong could be measured by the light of God's love or holiness. God's sovereign will, as they put it, covers everything. It is one thing to speak of God's sovereignty, but another as to whether it is the Biblical doctrine of God's sovereignty.

### **Second error: God's will is incomprehensible**

Secondly, it is argued that because God's will is sovereign, it is incomprehensible and inscrutable. They use this argument to cover any questioning of their doctrine of God's will. Calvin often speaks of God's will as incomprehensible. If you question Calvin about it, he will simply say it's incomprehensible. That is a safe way of defending something incomprehensible. You cannot attack something that is perpetually incomprehensible. Who are you but a man? Calvin often quotes the words, "Who art thou, O man?" God is God, you are man, so don't ask any questions about God's incomprehensible will.

## **The dangers of Calvin's doctrine of predestination**

What are the dangers of this doctrine? The dangers are many. I will speak out forthrightly because I am aware of its frightful dangers.

## **1. You cannot love God whose will is incomprehensible**

The danger is that God becomes unintelligible. How do you love God when there is no way for you to understand His actions, since His will is incomprehensible? You can only worship Him blindly, not because of His love or His holiness, but because of His supreme will. And you, as a creature, will simply submit to Him. He dictates and you obey. His will is supreme, so worship Him. He commands and it shall be. With such a doctrine, I wonder if it is possible to truly love God, not just to fear Him.

## **2. You cease to be responsible for your actions**

The second consequence of this doctrine is that it removes human responsibility. You cease to be responsible for your actions because the only thing that matters is God's will. What you do or don't do doesn't really matter, for only God's will matters. This doctrine will breed a Christianized irresponsibility with fearful consequences.

What is the error of Calvinism? It is simply this: Nowhere do I see in Scripture that God's will is ever made without rhyme or reason. Everywhere in the Bible, we see that God's will is governed by His love and His holiness. For human beings and equally for the God of the Bible, your character governs the function of your will. That is why you can often predict what a certain person will do or decide to do in the circumstances, because you know his character well enough. You know how his will functions. It is simply not true to Scripture to say that

the will, whether God's or man's, functions independently of character. Yet that is what predestinarian doctrine presupposes.

We find in Scripture that God's love and God's holiness are the qualities that govern the functioning of His will. Now I can understand God! I might not understand Him perfectly, but I can understand Him in good measure. I can respond to His love and holiness, but I cannot respond to a will that is arbitrary, unpredictable, and has no rhyme or reason that I can see. How do you respond to such a God? The answer is probably that you don't. God does all the responding in you; you are more or less a spiritual marionette.

Some of what we are discussing may be over your heads, being too theological or philosophical. But I have to present it in a way that is suitable for those who are equipped to handle it, so that they can get something too. Nowadays, preaching is often so superficial that those who want to think and work at it, are given nothing much. I apologize if some of this is over your heads, but others need to understand it.

## **Jesus uses parables to help us understand the truth**

In the light of all this discussion, let us now ask: When Jesus spoke in parables, was it to conceal the truth, or was it to reveal? What would your answer be now? I hope you are in a better position to answer this question. Did the Lord Jesus preach to

the crowds with the specific intention that they would not understand his message?

Can you imagine if that is the situation? Would this not reduce Jesus' preaching to a meaningless exercise, if we may reverently say so? What is the point of preaching if you don't want the people to understand your message? Can you imagine me purposely preaching a message with the intention that you won't understand it? Are we attributing to Christ what we ourselves would not do? As I said, if I preach with the intention that you do not understand, would it not be wiser that I don't preach at all, that I close my Bible and walk away? No, I preach with the intention that you should understand.

Let us ask a further question: What is a parable? Well, a parable is more or less an illustration. That's all it is, isn't it? A parable is a well-chosen illustration that packs the divine truth into a picture. Let us then ask, What is an illustration for? Is it designed to conceal what you want to say, or reveal what you want to say? Put this way, the answer is plain. You use an illustration to help a person understand, not to stop him from understanding. This is plain, isn't it? And when the Lord Jesus preaches in parables, he is simply preaching by means of an illustration, which is designed to help you understand.

Jesus says to Nicodemus in John 3:12, "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" This illustrates perfectly the point of a parable. Jesus knows that we have problems understanding spiritual things, so he speaks to us in earthly pictures. He says, "If I tell you spiritual things, you won't understand. So I speak

to you in earthly pictures. If you can understand the earthly picture, you will understand by extension the spiritual picture. But if you don't even understand the earthly picture, how are you going to understand the spiritual things that I tell you in plain language?"

The Lord Jesus brings out the truth in a way we can understand it by means of pictures: birds, flowers, trees, sunshine, and other familiar things. He knows that our spiritual understanding is dull, so he speaks to us as a teacher might speak to Sunday school children. Some of you have taught Sunday school children. When you speak to them, do you turn to Romans chapter 8 and give them an exposition of salvation? The children will stare at you and wonder what you are saying. You don't teach children this way because they won't understand it. So how do you teach them? Have you ever seen how Sunday school teachers use pictures? Do they use pictures in order that the children may not understand? Of course they want the children to understand. They use pictures rather than direct speech because children often cannot understand spoken language. You have to put the message in pictures to help them grasp the teaching in the Bible.

That is exactly what the Lord Jesus does. He speaks to the people, most of them farmers. Is he going to give them an exposition as Paul does in Romans chapter 8? Of course not. They won't understand it. So the Lord speaks to them on their level. He tells them a story for them to think about; and as they reflect on the story, they catch its inner message. This is like sowing the seed of a Bible story in a child's heart: as the child

thinks about it, he or she will say, “Oh yeah, I see the story!” The Lord’s whole intention in telling parables is that we may understand.

## **You will only understand as much truth as you are willing to obey**

This leads to a question: Why do Christians have such great problems understanding spiritual truth? As today’s passage explains, they have closed their eyes to the things of God; their spiritual response is dull. Yet Paul says that the gospel is not hidden (2Cor. 4:3). When Paul preaches the gospel, he doesn’t preach it so that people won’t understand, but that they may understand. Hence he says in the same verse, “If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing.” Why is it hidden to those who are perishing? Because they don’t want to hear the truth or respond to God’s Word.

This verse contains a principle you must grasp: *You will only understand as much truth as you are willing to obey it.* That is why some people are saved and others are not, and why some become spiritual giants and others become spiritual dwarfs. I repeat, you will only understand God’s Word in proportion to your willingness to obey it.

Closing the eyes is an act of the will, an unwillingness to see the truth. I fear that even if you are a Christian, you may open your eyes only partially. You want just enough of the gospel to get you to heaven. Am I right or am I wrong? I may have touched on a sore spot there. I suspect that many go to mass

evangelistic rallies because they only want as much of the gospel as will get them to heaven. They don't want to hear more beyond that, in the hope that the minimum will be required of them. The problem is that you don't know how much of the gospel is just enough. If you think like this, you may end up with nothing at all. That is the significance of the following words in Luke 8:18 (Mt. 13:12; 25:29):

Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away. (ESV)

When you come to the Word of God, have you not often said, "I don't like listening to this. I don't think we need to practice it. It's too demanding and impossible to practice." When Jesus says, "Except a man take up his cross and deny himself and follow me, he cannot be my disciple," what do you say to that? Do you say, "No way. That's asking too much. The cost is too high. Surely you can lower the cost of the gospel, and appeal to the crowds. How do you expect me to be saved—to become your disciple—if you ask me to deny myself?"

Another preacher comes along and says, "Salvation costs you nothing. Hallelujah! All you have to do is believe in God, and you will be saved. You will have peace and joy. It costs you nothing! Come to the front when the choir is singing, and sign the decision card."

The choir sings beautifully, and your heart is moved. When everybody is quiet with their heads bowed, you come to the front, and a counselor speaks with you.

I too can preach, “All you have to do is believe in Jesus.” But I don’t do that because I know I wouldn’t be speaking the truth.

You are not even told what “believe in Jesus” means. Presumably, you would confess your sins, which you are willing to do. But what does it mean to “believe in Jesus”? Believing that he died for you? So you confess your sins, and believe that he died for you. Hallelujah! You are in heaven, or almost there! With this kind of gospel, what is there to worry about? You are willing to listen to this because it costs you absolutely nothing.

In fact, Robert Laidlaw stated it unashamedly in *The Reason Why*, a well-publicized tract of which I have to say I am utterly ashamed. To him, becoming a Christian means that you have everything to gain, and absolutely nothing to lose. He was a businessman who once did business in Shanghai. He wrote this tract which was distributed by the millions. Its popular appeal is not surprising because everybody hopes to get something for nothing.

Now where do you see in the Bible that becoming a Christian means gaining everything and losing absolutely nothing? “Except a man deny himself,” is what Jesus says. But Mr. Laidlaw and people like him present a different gospel. I don’t intend to teach this kind of gospel because I will speak the truth. As I have said before, even if nobody ever comes to worship in this place again, that doesn’t worry me. I will speak the truth. That is my commission. If the truth blinds people, it’s not because I want to blind them, but because that is what the truth does to those who don’t want to hear it.

## Understand the truth by obeying Christ

Brothers and sisters, I ask you to judge for yourselves whether this is the gospel we ought to preach. Jesus paid the price of our redemption, and the very least that God requires of us is that we give ourselves totally to Jesus, His Son. A total response to Jesus is an act of obedience to God's will. That is what "believe" means in the Biblical sense. It's not just that Jesus died for me, but that because he died for me, I believe with a total response, and say with Paul, "I no longer live for myself, but for him who died for me and rose again" (cf. 2 Cor. 5:15). No Christian ever lives for himself again, but only for the Lord Jesus, the one who died for him. That is the gospel!

"All you need to believe is that Jesus died for you," is an essential part of the message, but not all. If you truly believe that Jesus died for you, what should your response be even if you don't know the Bible? To me, the only fitting response is that if he gave himself for me in his obedience to God's will, I will give myself to him, put on Christ, and imitate him in obeying God's will. That is the only possible response of faith. Why do we lower the cost of salvation and adulterate the gospel?

If you say you believe in Jesus, do you understand that it also means living for him and therefore for God? I am not talking about full-time ministry, but living for Christ wherever you are, at school, in the office, in the factory—whether you are working at your company or studying for God. You belong to him because you were bought with a price.

The one title that Paul gloried in is “slave of Jesus Christ.” Some Bibles use the word “servant,” but the Greek word means a slave. Paul begins every letter by saying something to the effect “I belong to Jesus,” or “I have given myself to Jesus Christ. He bought me, so I am his slave. I rejoice to be his slave because he is committed to obeying God his Father.” Do you rejoice to be a slave of Jesus Christ? That is salvation! God is not willing that any should perish, so He sent His Son to speak the truth as plainly as we can understand it. And I seek to speak to you the truth as plainly as you can understand it.

Matthew 13:16 says, “Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.” Whose eyes are blessed because they see? The disciples, for they have yielded themselves totally to God. No wonder they are blessed. If you commit yourself fully to God, you are indeed blessed because your eyes will see. Have you ever been amazed by how clearly your eyes can see? Don’t you praise God for your ears that hear? Don’t you rejoice in that God has caused His Holy Spirit to fill your heart as it says in Romans 5:5, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us”?

I say once more: Whether God’s Word is open or closed to you is not because God doesn’t want you to understand. God forbid such a teaching! He wants you to understand His message. That is why His Christ, the Lord Jesus, conveys it to you as clearly as ever possible, even by a parable. Whether you understand or not depends on you.

## Chapter 7



# THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER FROM THE SALVATION VIEWPOINT

Matthew 13:1–9  
Montreal, July 23, 1978

<sup>1</sup> That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. <sup>2</sup> And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. <sup>3</sup> And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. <sup>5</sup> Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, <sup>6</sup> but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup> Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up

and choked them. <sup>8</sup> Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup> He who has ears, let him hear.” (Matthew 13:1–9, ESV)

**W**e continue our exposition of the teaching of the Lord Jesus by returning to the Parable of the Sower, this time from a different angle and with a different approach. Matthew’s presentation of the parable has three parts: first the parable itself; then a discussion with the disciples on the meaning of parables in general; and lastly an explanation of the parable. I will follow the Lord Jesus’ sequence quite precisely, as it is found in Matthew.

## **Part 1: Salvation is God’s gift to man**

The Parable of the Sower contains such great riches that one message or even two messages cannot exhaust it. Being a foundational parable, it sums up most effectively and most beautifully in a nutshell the Lord Jesus’ whole teaching on salvation.

I seek to bring out some of the riches in this parable by dividing my message into two parts. In the first part, I will expound the fact that salvation is God’s gift. In the second part, we will see how this gift becomes available to us through faith.

That is to say, we will examine what faith is, then explain what faith means in terms of commitment.

Look at this beautiful parable of the Lord Jesus. Is it not remarkable that he can say so much in the scope of one parable? Just expounding it is a task that challenges every preacher who tries to bring out its riches.

## **The seed is the Word of God, a gift**

The Lord Jesus says that the seed which is sown is the Word of God. The sower is the preacher, and is the Lord Jesus in the first instance. The soil into which the seed is sown is the heart of man. All this is clear. What more can we learn from the parable?

First, we notice that the seed is given freely as a gift. The seed falls upon the soil as a gift to that soil. The ground does not earn the seed nor is it deserving of the seed.

The seed is spoken of as the Word of God, but what is the Word of God? In the first instance, it is God's message. What kind of message? The message of salvation. It is the message of the kingdom of God. God's salvation is given to us through His Word—the seed—as a free and unmerited gift, just as the soil receives the seed as a gift, not having worked for it. Notice how this Word comes to us in the form of parables.

The Old Testament depicts the Word as light: "Your Word is a lamp to my feet, a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). Because the Word is light, it is meant to reveal, not hide. Light does not hide things but reveals things. This point is made clear

in Mark 4:21–23, which appears immediately after the Parable of the Sower. There Jesus says that the lamp is set on a stand. It is not hidden, in order that all who come into the house can see. The same point is found in Luke 8:16–17, again immediately following the Parable of the Sower, where the Lord Jesus says that the light is designed to reveal, not to hide. Whatever is hidden, is hidden in order to be revealed. The parables don't conceal salvation but reveal it.

## **The seed—the Word of God—is a mystery**

The parables—the Word, the seed—are also spoken of as a secret, as we see in Matthew 13:11,

And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. (ESV)

Notice that the secret is “given”. Here the Greek word *mystērion* is translated “secrets” or, in older translations, “mystery”. In the Bible, many things are described as mystery. The Word of God is said to be a mystery in Colossians 1:25–26. The gospel is called “the mystery of the gospel” in Ephesians 6:19. Christ is spoken of as a mystery in Colossians 2:2, “the mystery of God which is Christ.”

What is a mystery? In the Bible, a mystery is not just something that is hard to understand, but something impossible to understand until God reveals it to you. That is why it is called a mystery.

Think back to when you were not a Christian, and you found the gospel a mystery. When you listened to the gospel, did it make any sense to you? You could not understand it; it was a mystery to you. It was concealed from you until God revealed its meaning to you, as your heart opened to God. God revealed it to you so that you may understand it, receive it, know it, and make it your own.

Christ is a mystery. Can you understand him? Certainly not! That is why he is called “the mystery of God.” Until God reveals Christ to you, there is no way for you to know that he is the Christ whom God had sent.

The Word of God, too, is a mystery. Have you ever tried reading it? Then you will know it is a mystery. You go to a Bible study and you wonder, “What does this Bible study passage mean? I understand the words in English. I also understand the words in Chinese. I might even understand the words in Hebrew and Greek. But having read the words, I don’t understand what they mean! It is a mystery.”

The Word of God is a mystery. Intelligent people can read the Bible, yet not understand it. Ask a professor of mathematics, or medicine, or astronomy, or whatever discipline, to read a parable. He may read it, but he will not understand it. It is not because he is stupid, but because he cannot understand the parable until God reveals it to him. It is the mystery of the Word of God.

This is very important for understanding salvation. I am sure that every time you read the Bible, the fact it is a mystery will

dawn on you because you don't understand it, right? Try reading Colossians or Ephesians. And if you are up to it, try reading Revelation. I am sure you will be utterly convinced that the Word of God is a mystery! There is no way for you to understand it until God reveals its meaning to you.

I remember reading the book of Revelation many times as a young Christian, and I kept scratching my head because I could not make head or tail of it. Absolutely nothing! I consoled myself that at least I could partially understand the letters written to the seven churches. I could go that far. But once you get past Revelation chapter 3, you are in deep waters, and the whole thing is a mystery! But God can open the mystery to you.

I remember how, when I was having a time of rest in Switzerland, I opened the book of Revelation before God, and said, "Lord God, teach me, I beg of You. Let Your Spirit reveal to me what this means." And when I read Revelation again, I was amazed that I was beginning to understand it! The light began to dawn on me, and the riches started to come forth. It was so incredible! All the things in God's Word are a mystery, so it is God's gift to you that you understand it.

Therefore anyone who boasts in his exceedingly good knowledge of the Bible is not fit to serve God. He has not yet understood that if he understands anything at all, it is because the Spirit of God has revealed it to him. As people listen to my expositions, some say to me, "We have never heard such expositions." I say to you, I have nothing whatsoever to be proud of. Nothing! If there is something I have seen, it is because God has revealed it to someone who is utterly unworthy. I am not

saying this out of humility but because it is the plain truth. The moment I think I am clever, or think I can give an exposition better than others, God will say, “I have finished with you. You are no longer of use to Me because you think you are somebody.” The Word of God is a mystery, and it is God’s gift to me that I understand it.

We read in Matthew 13:11, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.” The disciples were not entitled to know the secrets of God, nor could they say to God, “Look at me, I am so good! So it’s time for You to tell me Your secrets.” Oh no! None of us becomes good enough to be told the secrets of God. It is utterly of grace, and grace means that you did not earn it or deserve it; it is God’s gift to you. Anyone who has walked with God will know grace; and I preach utterly of grace.

## **The seed—the Word of God—brings life**

Notice how beautifully the Lord Jesus speaks of the Word of God as a seed. That is because a seed has life in it. A stone has no life, but a seed has life. The sure thing you can say about a seed is that it has life in it, and once the seed is implanted into the ground, it brings life to that piece of ground. The ground will become fruitful because the seed is in it.

Observe that this Word of God conveys life to us. The ground has no life of its own. I have no life of my own in my soul. I am dead without the grace of God. It is beautiful that the ground should be compared to the heart. The ground is mud.

What is mud? As we often picture it, it is dirt and filth. That is my heart. Our hearts are often so dirty, aren't they? But God plants the seed in my heart, and transforms this dirt, this unrighteousness, this filth, into something productive by His power. That is the amazing transforming power of grace.

Now all this has to do with salvation, and salvation is about life. When the Word of God comes into your life, it brings God's life into your soul so that you become a new person, a new creature. The unrighteousness of your heart is transformed into fruitful ground for the propagation of God's Word to bless others. We see this in 1 Peter 1:23, "You are born again not of corruptible seed but of the incorruptible seed, namely, God's Word." The Word of God is compared to seed because it has God's life and transforming power in it, causing you to be born again. It brings salvation to your soul as God's gift to you, assuming that you are willing to accept it.

Let us summarize this first point and remember that the seed is the Word of God; the seed is a gift; the seed is a mystery; the seed is life.

## **The seed characterizes Jesus**

When you ponder for a moment, you will realize that all these terms are also used to describe the Lord Jesus himself. He is called "the mystery," as we have seen in Colossians 2:2. Jesus is "the life" in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth and the life." Then Jesus is God's gift to us, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9:15, "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift." Or John 3:16,

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son”—Jesus is the gift. In Galatians 3:16, Jesus who is the Christ is called the “seed” in KJV, NASB, NIV. In the Greek text, the word “seed” refers to a human seed, which is why RSV translates it here as “offspring,” meaning descendant. This reminds us of Genesis 3:15 which says that the seed of the woman will crush the serpent on the head. In the parable of the sower, “seed” refers to the seed of a plant; both human seed and plant seed are spoken of as “seed”.

We now see that the seed is the Word of God, also called “the word of the kingdom” (Mt. 13:19). God’s salvation is given to us through His Word, the seed. Likewise, this message of salvation is in the seed, Jesus Christ. That is why Paul says, “We preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23).

How does a seed bring forth life? By dying. How does Jesus bring forth life? By being crucified. It’s easy to understand why he is called the seed. In fact, Jesus speaks of himself as the seed in John 12:24, “Except the seed falls to the ground and dies, it abides alone. But if it dies, it brings forth much fruit.” Isn’t that wonderful!

The Lord Jesus is the seed, God’s gift to us, the mystery of God; and through him, we receive God’s life. I say to you again, the only reason I am a Christian is that I have experienced God’s unbounded love for me in Jesus Christ. I am not interested in churches or church dogmas.

If anything, the church tends to exhaust us. Someone once said to me, “Christians are not only not extraordinary, they are not even ordinary!” They are supposed to be the light of the

world, but what do we see? Most of the time we see darkness, not light. Despite the problems of the church, despite my weaknesses, despite my shame over the people who call themselves “Christians,” and despite being disgusted with myself for not giving God more, what keeps me going as a Christian? Nothing but the glory and the beauty of God—that He loves me, that He has given me not merely blessings but has given me His Son in order to forgive me and to reconcile me to Himself!

Have you ever thought of giving your son to somebody? What would you think if somebody says to you, “I love you so much that I will give you my beloved son”? That person must really love you with unlimited love. Yet God reaches out to someone as unworthy as I, and says, “Here is My Son, I give him to you.”

And the Spirit of God opened my eyes to see the self-giving beauty of Jesus Christ, with the glory of God shining in his face (2 Cor. 4:6). Remember, Christ is a mystery, so you cannot understand him in your own wisdom. If God had not opened my eyes to see something of Christ’s glory, I would never have seen it.

How then am I to preach Christ? How do I share about his glory? Only the eyes that have seen that glory understands it, as in the case of the apostle Paul, who saw it on the road to Damascus.

How would you describe Jesus Christ? I can speak of him as God’s mystery, or as God’s life given to me, but I cannot say, “Here is life. Look at it.” You cannot see life as a physical object, you cannot smell it, you cannot hear it, you cannot touch it,

you cannot taste it. Some people say they won't believe in anything they can't see. You can see the outward manifestations of life, but you cannot see life itself. If I give you a seed and say, "Inside the seed is life," and if you cut the seed with a knife, and say, "I'm going to look at life," will you see life?

You cannot see life as a physical object, but you can experience life. That is what you and I can do. I cannot experience life for you. I can only tell you how to experience it. You have to let the Spirit of God reveal Christ to you, then the fire will begin to burn in your heart. Nothing so kindles the fire in a person's heart as the vision of God's holy love manifested by His gift of Jesus Christ. It is beyond my power to give you the vision of "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," to let the fire of devotion burn in your heart. I can only tell you the path that will lead you to it.

And when you arrive there, you will see the glory of God in Christ. You will no longer want to talk about the personal cost, you will no longer want to talk about personal sacrifice, because there is nothing you can offer to God that is even worth talking about.

I have constantly wrestled with the question: How to bring people to a vision of that glory? Christ is God's indescribable gift to us. It has been given to you. Have you received it?

## **Part 2: Salvation is available to us through a commitment of faith**

This takes me to the second part of my message. God has freely given His seed to everyone. Salvation in Christ is God's gift to humankind, and salvation is found only in Christ, for there is no salvation apart from him. God doesn't give you an object called "life"; he doesn't give you an object called "salvation." All of God's gifts are found only in Christ. Life is in the seed alone. Salvation is only in Christ (2 Tim. 2:10). Nowhere else can you find it. But now, seeing that God has freely given salvation, and that God has so loved the whole world, why is the world not saved? John 3:19 tells us, "they loved darkness rather than light." The problem is that God's gift is free, but not every heart is willing to take it. Anyone who wants to get salvation without Christ, or have Christ only as a means of getting to salvation, doesn't even know what salvation is.

We hear a lot about faith, that we are saved by faith. I sometimes deliberately avoid using this word "faith" because it is so overworked that nobody actually knows what it means. We are certainly "justified by faith," but whatever does faith mean? I have heard all kinds of definitions being given. The most frequently quoted is Hebrews 11:1, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the confidence of things not seen." What does it tell you? I fear it has told you nothing, and I mean this in a specific sense. Faith is the confidence of things not seen, but faith itself is not seen either. So what is not seen

becomes the assurance of what is not seen! What does that tell us? If you try to analyze this in terms of logic, you will find it to be a meaningless statement. It will simply end up saying that you believe whatever you happen to believe. To a person who doesn't have faith, that is not a definition, for it tells him absolutely nothing.

Hebrews 11:1 is simply telling you what is the effect of faith on you. It is not a definition of faith in its essence. The one who has faith understands what faith is because he already has faith. He knows what it is because he has faith, and has the assurance of the things not seen. Because I have faith, I have confidence in the things hoped for.

## **Saving faith is like staking your life on a strong man**

What then is faith? Faith is illustrated in various ways by preachers. Charles Spurgeon, the English Baptist preacher, illustrates it in the following way as do many preachers. A child is standing at a window, and the house is on fire. The only recourse for the child is to jump from the window. Down below is a strong man with outstretched arms who says, "Jump, I will catch you." So the child, seeing the flames approaching from behind, places his life into his own hands: he takes the courage to jump, and leaps into the arms of the strong man below, who catches him. This is an illustration of faith.

How does faith come into all this? What is the illustration telling me? It tells me that faith is the attitude of the child who

trusts the strong man, and therefore jumps out the window into his arms. What is meant by trust here? You may say that trust in this case is driven by the fear of the flames, yet the trust is in the strong man, and the strong man is meant to represent the Lord Jesus.

The reason I use the word “commitment” rather than “trust” is that “trust” is far too weak; it doesn’t express an attitude of total commitment. The child is doing much more than trusting the strong man, if we are to use this as an illustration of a genuine act of Biblical faith. If the strong man fails to catch him, the child will be dead or crippled. Biblical faith is a trust in which one stakes his own life. You don’t stake anything by simply believing that Jesus, the Lamb of God, died for you. What have you staked? That is why I am concerned about the misuse of the word “faith.”

Robert Laidlaw, the one who wrote the popular tract *The Reason Why*, uses an utterly distasteful argument which Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship* would call “cheap grace”. Laidlaw’s argument goes like this: If you believe that Jesus died for you and you are wrong, you lose nothing; but if you are right, you gain eternal life. You cannot lose either way since you stake absolutely nothing, right?

Suppose somebody gives you a free Lotto Canada or Lotto Quebec lottery ticket. If your ticket happens to be drawn, you may win a million dollars. But if you win nothing, you would not lose anything either, because the ticket was given to you as a free gift, right? So it doesn’t matter if you got nothing, because you staked nothing. If you win, you gain everything; if you lose,

you lose nothing. So either way, you have nothing to lose. Is receiving a free Lotto Canada ticket tantamount to faith? Laidlaw says faith costs you absolutely nothing. You have everything to gain, and nothing to lose. But where is the faith? Is receiving a free Lotto ticket comparable to a child's jumping out the window?

I have heard evangelists preach salvation as: "Jesus is God's gift to you." But receiving Jesus in response to this kind of gospel is not faith. If you accept Jesus, and he turns out to be false, you won't lose anything, will you? So it's a good bet! But if he turns out to be true, you've hit the jackpot, my friend! You've got eternal life! That is even better than winning a million dollars from Lotto Canada, for you can't buy eternal life with a million dollars. Is receiving Jesus in the way you receive a free Lotto ticket something that you would call "faith"? That is not faith. That is just taking a chance. In fact, it's not even taking a chance because it costs you absolutely nothing one way or the other. If you had to pay for the lottery ticket, at least you stand to lose the cost of the ticket.

Think again of Spurgeon's illustration of the child who jumps out the window, staking his life on the man who catches him. Now that is faith. That kind of faith is total commitment because you have staked your life. Have you staked anything when you accepted Jesus whom God sent as your Savior? If Jesus turns out to be false, what did you lose? I think for the majority of you, you would lose nothing. You go to church every Sunday, and it is a good experience. Singing songs has a calming effect on you. You meet lots of nice people in church

even if you think they are deluded. So what do you lose? Nothing. You've still got your job. Your salary is not reduced when you become a Christian. In fact, because you are a Christian, the management knows that you are trustworthy, so you may get a raise and a promotion. Being a Christian brings every advantage to you. Even if the gospel turns out to be false and you have been a Christian all your life, what will you lose? Nothing. You still have your house, your car, and your job. You now have much better friends than worldly friends—friends who will stand by you when you are in trouble. So what have you staked as a Christian? Nothing.

## **Another illustration: Staking your life on a plank**

Let me use another illustration which is often used by preachers. I am sure you have heard this illustration before. A missionary describes his experiences in India. He is travelling to a particular place, and has to cross over a deep gorge by walking on a plank. He looks down and sees a river below. Now this plank is held with ropes, and is swaying in the wind. So the missionary says, "No way! I'm not crossing!" But the natives assure him that the plank is trustworthy, so they go back and forth on the plank completely at ease. But the missionary says, "I am a six-foot-tall Westerner. I am taller and heavier than you. The fact that you can walk across is no evidence that I can go across, because the plank can take your weight but not mine." So he refuses to cross the plank. Then the people say,

“Okay, we will cross two together on the plank because two together would surely be heavier than you.” So two of them walk on the bridge together. Left without excuse, this missionary plucks up his courage and goes across on the plank in fear and trembling. He inches his way across the plank and reaches the other side.

This is an illustration of faith. He put his faith in the plank. At first he didn't trust the plank. But after seeing a multitude of witnesses—as in Hebrews 12:1, “so great a cloud of witnesses”—he plucked up his courage and took the step of faith to cross the plank.

Does that not illustrate the same point as the child who stakes his life by jumping into the arms of the strong man? If the plank cannot hold his weight, he stands to lose his life. He loses everything if his faith is wrong. Faith is not faith in the Biblical sense unless you stake everything, even your life, on it. If the plank doesn't hold his weight, he is going to go down in utter destruction. Now that is a definition of faith. But the faith preached by evangelists today, which does not involve committing oneself totally or staking one's life, is not faith in the Biblical sense. A faith that is like receiving a lottery ticket as a gift—you may win something but you will lose nothing—is not Biblical faith. I would like you to get this very clear.

## **Faith is total commitment**

Preaching the gospel the way Robert Laidlaw presents it in his tract—“Believe that Jesus is God's gift to you, and you will have

eternal life; but if it turns out to be false, you will lose nothing”—is a travesty of Biblical teaching. It is a disgrace! I am ashamed of it! Even worse, it is a lie! If you are not totally committed to Christ, you will seek in vain the gift of salvation which is given to those with faith. You are justified by faith, which is total commitment as we see in the illustration used by Spurgeon and the illustration of the missionary. That is the Biblical understanding.

In Hebrews chapter 11, you will not see any faith that resembles the Lotto Canada type. Every example of faith in Hebrews 11 is an example of total commitment. Abraham staked everything on God’s Word. He went forth, not knowing where God wanted him to go. He staked his life, his family, his career, everything, on it. When God said, “Go!” he went. That is total commitment.

By faith, Moses counted the riches of Egypt as nothing. He turned his back on Egypt, and went out to be identified with the people of God. He lost everything. He staked his life.

The list of examples of faith in Hebrews 11 ends with these words in verse 33:

... who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions.

If faith doesn’t work, the lions will get you, not you get the lions. If you lack faith, it is not you who will conquer kingdoms, but the kingdoms will conquer you. We read Hebrews 11 with our eyes closed and think that salvation is a matter of, “I believe that God sent Jesus to die for me. It costs me nothing. And if it

is wrong, I lose nothing.” That is a wrong understanding of faith.

## Only the totally committed are saved

Let us look at the Parable of the Sower again. In this parable, there are two groups of people. The first group has three categories of the unsaved. The second group has three categories of the saved.

In the second group, the three categories of the saved differ in the degree of fruitfulness: they bring forth fruit thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold.

In the first group, the three categories of the unsaved are: (i) the seed that falls on the hard path; (ii) the seed that falls on the rocky ground—they believe and accept the Word of God but have no root; and (iii) the seed that receives the Word of God but is choked by the thorns (the world). Category (i) consists of unbelievers whereas categories (ii) and (iii) consist of believers. Hence, in this parable, the unsaved can even include believers.

Christians insist that the unsaved are unbelievers, not believers. How amazing! Jesus’ thinking is clearly not our thinking. On the contrary, in the parable, categories (ii) and (iii) of the unsaved *are believers*, not unbelievers. Both received the Word of God. One received it with joy but had no root and fell away; the other received the Word of God but is choked by the cares of the world.

There are three things we can say about total commitment in regard to this parable.

## **1. Total commitment requires openness to God's Word**

The first point is that commitment requires openness. The soil must be open to receive the seed. After the soil has been ploughed, it is open. But in the case of seed falling on hard ground, the ground is not open but closed. The seed cannot penetrate the ground, so the birds eat it.

Commitment or faith is openness to the Word of God, an openness to God Himself. Is your heart open to God's Word? I have the confidence that your hearts are open to God's Word, because if you were not, I don't see why you would be in church now. So I have the confidence that at least you have fulfilled the first stage: your hearts are open to God's Word. This is essential yet not enough.

## **2. Total commitment: God's Word totally possesses your heart**

What is the second step? It is this: Having entered into the soil, the seed must gain total possession of the soil, that is, the Word of God must gain total possession of your heart. This didn't take place for two categories of the unsaved group (the shallow soil and the soil with thorns), so they perished despite having received the Word of God.

Does the Word of God have total possession of your heart? Or is there some rock underneath, a certain hardness of heart

that limits God, and says to Him, “You’ve come far enough in my life, but go no farther. I am willing to be religiously respectable, but not to be a religious fanatic like those in the full-time training. They studied mathematics, chemistry, computer science, or whatever, and throw everything away. They are nuts! They are fanatics! As for me, I draw the line here. I am wise. I take the *zhong dao* (中道, the mean). I have the right balance—not too far to one side, not too far to the other.”

My friend, if you draw a line, you will end up with nothing! If you tell God, “You are Lord of my life but don’t come further,” then He is not your Lord at all. Either He is Lord of all or He is not Lord at all. Have you drawn a line in your life?

You might not have drawn any line in your life, yet allow the cares of this world to dominate your life. You are preoccupied with the world. If you say to God, “You are my Lord, but I am concerned with many interests in this world,” then you will end up like the seed that fell in the soil among the thorns, and got choked.

These two categories of the unsaved failed because although the commitment is there, it is not total. Jesus is saying that unless the seed gains total possession of the soil—with no line drawn, with no anxiety or preoccupation regarding worldly affairs—you cannot survive.

So firstly, we need to be open to God and His Word, which is true of all of you here. But secondly, ask yourself whether you are able to say, “Lord, take all of my life, all of my heart, such that there is no place in my life where you are not Lord.” I

wonder how many of you—and how many preachers—can honestly say that.

F.B. Meyer (1847–1929) was a great preacher whose ministry was towards the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. He wrote many exceedingly good books of great value that are well worth reading. He confides that when he was the pastor of a church that he was ministering, all that happened was that the church died in his hands. It had no life. He went before God and said, “Lord, what’s wrong with me?” The Lord said, “What’s wrong with you is that you’ve got rocks in your life. You have drawn a line. I am not totally Lord of your life.” Then he suddenly realized it: “That’s true. I belong to the category of people of good topsoil but there are rocks underneath! I didn’t allow God to go beyond this in my life. I stopped Him right at that point.” And God said to F.B. Meyer, “I can’t use you because you have closed part of your life to Me.” So he knelt before God and said, “God, here is all my life. Here are the keys to every room in my house. No room is closed to You. I beg of You, take down the whole door so that you won’t even have to use the keys anymore.” And he said that God did exactly that. God took down the door and put a window in its place, through which His light shone into every room of his life. From that time on, God used F.B. Meyer mightily.

What is your life like? How many doors of your life are closed to God?

### **3. Total commitment: Accept trials, tribulations, persecution**

The third thing essential to commitment is the thing essential to the seed: the sun. Without light, nothing will grow. I already pointed out that the parable uses three different Greek words to speak of suffering: trials, tribulations, and persecution. These are compared to the sun whose sunlight promotes the growth of the seed.

I am often asked, “How can I know that I am totally committed? Do I know this by the fact that I have entered full-time service?” My answer is, “Not in the least.” As I mentioned, there are pastors who are not totally committed, as F.B. Meyer, this great preacher, shared with us. Here is a pastor who went through Bible college and seminary, yet was not totally committed. I would like to know how many people in Bible colleges are totally committed to God. When I visited Prairie Bible Institute, I spoke to the students there and challenged every one of them. I wanted to know how much God was Lord in their lives. Don’t think that by becoming a preacher, you are totally committed to God. Not necessarily so.

So how can you know you are committed? It is seen in how you react to the sun. That is the test! You will notice that in this parable, the sun destroys the plant that has no root, yet the other plants grow exceedingly well in sunlight. Have you noticed how a flower turns towards the sun? It opens up as the sun comes out. And when the sun disappears, the flower closes again. It shows forth its whole beauty as the sun rises. So does

the true Christian. But the seed that has no root—whose commitment is weak, inadequate, or non-existent—will be wiped out.

The sun that brings life, prosperity, and spiritual growth to one plant, also brings destruction to another. Isn't that remarkable? We read in this beautiful parable of the Lord Jesus that when the sun rose, the plants in the shallow ground withered and died. But those in the good soil grew abundantly—thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold. The sun brings forth life. When difficulty or persecution arises, that is the time we will see whether a person is a true Christian or a false Christian. When a trial comes to you, you can tell whether you are a totally committed Christian or not.

I always think back to the time we preached the gospel in Wales, in the sixties. There the seed of God's Word had been scattered decades earlier, in 1904, and brought forth tremendous fruit in the mighty Welsh Revival. So mighty was the moving of God's Spirit that the whole place was transformed. Whether in buses or on the streets, everyone was singing hymns to God. Imagine walking down Sainte-Catherine Street in Montreal, with everybody singing praise to God! That was what happened during the Welsh Revival. *But today the whole place is dead.*

An incident that impressed itself deeply on my mind was the time we went from door to door to witness for Christ. One dear brother knocked on a certain door, and when he explained the purpose of his visit, the door was soundly slammed in his face. Yet when he came back to us, his face was beaming with joy. So

I thought he had a great time of witnessing. I asked, “What happened to you?” He said “Hallelujah! I just had the door slammed in my face!”

That struck me because all the others would rejoice only if people listened with great attention and courtesy, even offering biscuits and a cup of tea. But here was someone who rejoiced because the door was slammed in his face! He counted it such joy to suffer for God. I said to myself, here is somebody whom God is going to use, because he radiates when the sun shines upon him. When persecution comes, he shines with joy. He said, “Do you know what I said to the lady when she slammed the door in my face? I shouted through the door, ‘Dear lady, I love you so much! I will be praying for you.’”

Wow! I think he has a more powerful witness than those who go around waving their Bibles. Imagine getting the door slammed in your face, yet you say, “I love you!” That kind of Christian has commitment!

Charles Wesley, that great servant of God who lived in the 1700s, wrote detailed journals that we can read today. As he went about preaching, he was often beaten: his clothes were torn, his hair was pulled, his face was punched. Yet all that we read in his journals are expressions of love and warmth. There is not the slightest bitterness towards those who persecuted and tormented him, but only love. He thanked God for the privilege of suffering. That is a man of God!

During China’s Cultural Revolution, many of our brothers and sisters stretched out their hands to be taken away by the police, and they said, “Thank-you, I am unworthy of such a

privilege!” The police must have thought bemusedly, “You thank me for handcuffing you?” They rejoiced that the sun was shining upon them. Thanks be to God!

Look at the apostle Paul who says, “We rejoice in our sufferings” (Romans 5:3). Do you now see why he is totally committed? He staked everything on God, and is ready to lose all. That is faith!

How then do you know whether you have total commitment? The next time everything goes wrong for you, the next time your parents turn against you, the next time your friends turn against you, the next time you lose your job because as a Christian you didn’t want to cheat at taxes, see whether you are totally committed, whether you rejoice and say, “Hallelujah! What a privilege to live for God!” Or will you say, “See what is happening to me? Being a Christian has cost me my job! That is the problem with being a Christian!”

Your commitment will be tested by the sun that shines. It tested my commitment. Many times I have been penniless in serving God, and I would say to myself, “Hallelujah! Now I know what it feels to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, who had nowhere to lay his head, and didn’t even have a coin in his pocket.” When somebody asked Jesus, “Should we pay taxes?” he had to get a coin from someone in order to ask the question, “Whose inscription is this on the coin?” If he had a coin in his own pocket, he would have just pulled it out. Oh, it is good to be Jesus’ disciple, to imitate him in serving and living for God!

I stake my life on God. When I went to England to be trained in God’s work, I had no money. I was not allowed to work, and

did not want to work illegally. So I committed my cause to God. If my God is not real, I would have literally starved in the gutter. But my God proved Himself. Only the one who stakes his life on God will experience His power. No one else will experience His power.

God's gift of justification is given to us freely, but in receiving that gift, in receiving that seed into my life, I stake my life on this gift of God. And if God is not real—God forbid!—it will cost me everything. But I know whom I have believed, which is why I stake my life on Him. And because I stake my life on Him, I know whom I have believed. So the cycle goes on. When you stake your life on God, you'll see His power manifested, therefore you trust Him even more. And because you trust Him even more, you'll stake even more on Him.

## **The quality of commitment determines the fruitfulness**

One final point: In this rich parable that is before us, there are some who bear fruit thirtyfold, some sixtyfold, some a hundredfold. If all of us are totally committed, why is there a difference in the yield?

Every person can be totally committed, but it doesn't mean that the quality of that commitment is the same. It may be equally total yet not equal in quality. Let us return to the illustration of faith in terms of crossing a deep gorge on a plank. Anyone who walks on the plank is totally committed because if the plank breaks, he loses his life. But the quality of that

commitment can be different. The missionary may have committed himself totally to the plank, but was there joy in that commitment? No. Although he was totally committed, there was fear, hesitation, and trembling. The quality of his commitment was not the same as the commitment of those who walked across the plank with joy and singing. Both staked their lives totally on that plank to support them, but the quality of their commitment was different.

The child escaping a fire may jump from the top floor with great hesitation, crying and trembling, or he may jump with utter confidence, with no fear and trembling. Both jumped, yet their attitudes were different.

I have seen the difference in quality among those who are totally committed. I have seen those who have given up everything to follow Christ, but they go through life groaning, "I have given up everything for God, and look at what I have to endure!" You cannot deny that they have committed everything to God, but what is quality of their lives? Why do they bother to do it if they complain about it? There are others who commit totally to God with joy, even radiance!

Think again of the illustration of the plank. If I walk on it trembling all the way across, will it encourage others to cross too? They will be very hesitant. But if you see someone striding across with great confidence, you will say, "Oh, that's great, I'll cross over too." Do you see that your witness depends on the quality of your commitment?

We see the quality of Paul's commitment as he stakes everything and rejoices in tribulation. Those who see him will

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say, “The God of the apostle Paul is wonderful! Paul regards the cost as nothing.” But another person forever mutters about the cost. He trembles on the plank, thinking: “I made it, but at a high cost to myself!” No wonder others will think, “If that is the case, I don’t think I am going to cross.”

Do you see the difference? The one who crosses the plank with confidence will inspire many others to cross with confidence. But the one who crosses with hesitation may prevent others from crossing, or cause them to cross with hesitation. Transposing this illustration to the picture of fruitfulness, the yield—thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold—will depend on the quality of the witness. May we not only have a totally committed faith, but also one of such quality, such radiance, such power, that others can see God’s glory in us!



## Chapter 8



# DO YOU HAVE THE SPIRITUAL ROOT IN YOUR INNER BEING?

Matthew 13:20–21; Colossians 2:7

Hong Kong, March 20, 1983

### **Spiritual root in your inner being**

**T**oday I focus on the following two verses in the very important Parable of the Sower (note the words in boldface):

But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root **in himself**, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. (Matthew 13:20–21, NKJV)

I am quoting this passage from the New King James Version because two important Greek words are omitted (not translated) in the NIV. Whereas the Greek text says, “since he has no root in himself,” the NIV has “since they have no root,” omitting “in himself” (these two words are, however, found in ESV, NASB, NET, RSV). We now turn our attention to the words “in himself,” which H.A.W. Meyer correctly translates as “in his own inner being” (*Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew*, p.256).

Some Christians have this root and some do not. If you don’t have it, you will not survive. This root is a matter of spiritual life and death; it is absolutely vital for your survival. So we need to ask: Do you have this root in yourself?

Some people from overseas have said, “We hear that the church in Montreal is quite alive, but some who have returned from Montreal seem to be quite dead.” And you are right. In the spiritual atmosphere of the Montreal church, they are like coal in a fire. When you put a piece of coal in the fire, it gets heat from the other pieces of coal, and everything is fine. But if you remove this piece of coal and place it somewhere in isolation, it cannot perpetuate the fire within itself.

To use the picture of the Parable of the Sower, these people have no root in themselves. This is a big concern for me regarding the church in Montreal, but also you in Hong Kong. I would like you to ask yourself, do you have this spiritual root in yourself? When a Christian has this root in himself, one of the first signs is that he is not much affected by external

circumstances, for he can draw strength from within. He has an inner source of power. Do you have this source?

## **Can you withstand opposition to the truth?**

Matthew 13:20 says that when a person of the second type hears the Word of God, he “immediately receives it with joy.” So he says, “Wow, it’s so good!” But verse 21 says that he lasts only for a short time. He seems to be fine for a while, but only until “tribulation or persecution arises because of the Word.”

Troubles will always come to the Christian life. People are always giving me trouble, and I praise God for that! If Satan doesn’t give me trouble, I will get worried: “What’s wrong with me that Satan’s not interested in me?” The Lord Jesus says that when people think well of you and say good things about you, you are in trouble (Luke 6:26). But when you go deep into God, the enemy will get annoyed with you. I know some people who are keen to bury me! The Word of God produces very strong reactions when it is preached with power. But if you preach the Word with no power, nobody bothers you; nobody cares what you say because it doesn’t touch them.

As we see in Acts 7, when Stephen preached the Word with power, the people were furious with him. The Word of God is like a knife cutting into their hearts, and they even put their fingers in their ears. Have you ever seen anyone in the church put their fingers in their ears, and grind their teeth? This was a powerful reaction to Stephen’s message. When that did not work, they killed him. When you preach the Word of God with

power, you are going to have tribulation and persecution. When this situation comes, the Christian with no spiritual root in himself won't stand.

When you go home and say to everyone, "I've become a Christian," your family will say, "What? Have you gone out of your mind? Don't talk to me anymore!" They will give you a hard time, so you say to yourself, "I can't take it! I surrender!"

When I was training to serve God, my parents didn't want to talk to me anymore. Whenever I came home, the first question my mother would ask was, "When are you leaving?" I am an only son, so when they treat an only son like that, they must be really annoyed. Can you stand this kind of persecution? If you are not persecuted at all by anyone, maybe you are making little impact with your Christian life. I don't mean that you go out and provoke people to persecute you, but when you live in God's power, in holiness, the natural reaction to you will be opposition. And I am concerned that you can stand firm. Do you have this root inside you?

## **Root: God's Word changes you in your heart**

I preached on the Parable of the Sower before, but the Word of God being very rich, I have never approached the parable from this angle, with the root as the key to this whole parable.

The Word of God is pictured as a seed. What happens when this seed is developing in your heart? It produces a root. Just as when you are planting a bean in moist soil, a root comes out. When you first listen to the Word of God, you just hear it and

understand it, but nothing much happens yet. But later the Word of God reaches down into your heart, and a root grows from your mind to your heart. Until the Word of God reaches your heart, there is no root, but when that happens, there is a root, and your life begins to change.

This point is vital because some people go to theological seminary to study the Bible, but when you look at their lives, there's nothing there. I was given a deep impression of this when I watched some students in the students lounge debating about predestination until their faces turned red: "You're wrong! I'm right!" The attitude to one another was like lions ready to eat each other up! When I saw their behavior, I felt sick to my stomach. I couldn't run out of that place fast enough! They treated the Word of God as some kind of philosophy. If some day I could take you to a seminary to see the arrogance of some students, you would know what I mean.

In this particular college, we all had to put on black gowns. As you are walking, the sleeves would fling about. As soon as you put on a gown, you feel important. Your head becomes very big: Look at these lesser people down there! This is what happens when you treat the Word of God like that. It's a disaster! I have spent years with these theological students as one of them, and I have often wondered, why are they studying the Bible? It is all in the head so that they can show their knowledge. They treat it as a profession. Their life is pitiful! That includes even my professor. I was under the supervision of a Hebrew professor who knew Hebrew very well, but it is all technical when I talk with him. I might as well be talking with

him about chemistry or physics; I don't even feel I am talking about the Bible. I would sometimes wonder if he knows God. I don't know the answer to this, because talking to him is like talking to a non-Christian.

What am I saying? You can read the Bible every day and be as dead as a stone. Don't think you are a good Christian just because you study your Bible. Theological students study the Bible every day, and some of them are worse than non-Christians in their behavior. They don't have the root of life inside them. I beg of you to understand this root. I repeat: When the Word of God reaches into your heart, the root grows, and God's power changes your life such that others say, "Hey, your life is changing!" Then of course the root has to go deeper.

## **Study the Bible to draw God's life into you**

It means that there are two different ways of studying the Bible. One is to study the Bible as technical knowledge, which is what theological students do. The other is to go into the Word of God with spiritual perception, drawing life from God's Word into your heart, just a root draws water and nourishment from the soil. Not only does the Word of God reach into your heart, it becomes a point of contact with God Himself.

Colossians 2:7 says "rooted in Christ," and verse 9 says "in him the whole fullness of deity [God] dwells bodily." There are two aspects to this: the root in us, and the extension of the root all the way to Christ, who is in union with God. We make contact with Christ first, by being united with him at baptism

to become a new person. The Word of God becomes a source of life to us through this root, otherwise God's Word will merely be a source of knowledge. I don't mean that there is anything wrong with knowledge, but knowledge isn't the point of God's Word which is meant to give us life.

Let us now look at the characteristics of the one who has the root "in himself".

## **1. A person with root in himself is stable**

In Scripture, root signifies stability. In both the Old and the New Testaments, to put down root means to be stable, having a firm grip on the ground. Psalm 80:8-9 says that God took a vine out of Egypt and cleared the ground for it; then the vine (Israel) "took deep root and filled the land." We have seen in Colossians 2:7 that to be "rooted in Christ" is to be connected with God through Christ. This root—the Word of God in your heart—will make you stable, which is vital. When one is unstable, it shows that the root is not there or not deep enough. One of the things we look for in those who request the full-time training is stability. We cannot accept anyone for training who lacks stability.

## **2. He loves God's Word, not money**

In the Bible, root also symbolizes source, cause, or motive. Take for example the well known words in 1 Timothy 6:10, "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." If you want to destroy

the source of evil in yourself, you must cut the root. It is an absolute law of the Christian life that when a Christian is in love with money, he has evil in himself. It is amazing what people will do out of the love of money: sell their sons or daughters or parents for money. If you want to get rid of an enemy, just hire someone to murder him. The love of money is the root of evil. With many Christians, that root is still there.

So there are two roots: one is the root of God's Word and the spiritual life; the other is the root of this world, the love of money. These two roots cannot coexist in us, for the one will choke the other, just as the roots of the thorns choke the seed in the parable.

### **3. He has initiative, and sets achievable objectives**

The spiritual root is a source, a cause, a motivation, so when a person has this root in himself, there is another mark in addition to stability: *initiative*. We look for spiritual drive or initiative in those who request the full-time training. There are some Christians who move one step if you push them. If you push harder, they may make two steps. If you don't push them, they will come to a standstill. You just can't get them to move! There is no inner dynamic, no motivation, no initiative.

But the Christian with spiritual root will press towards the mark. Such Christians always work towards the next objective, setting new targets. But they don't set a goal so far away that you can't see it except with a telescope. If you are a Christian

who has initiative, you will be very practical, and set achievable objectives.

Praise be to God, when I was a young Christian, God was working in my life with power. As a result, I kept on setting objectives. My first objective was to know the Word of God. So I worked on God's Word whenever I could find a spare moment. Even if it was a holiday, I would work all day on the Word of God. There was a time I was not studying theology but some other subjects, but whenever I found the time, I would work on God's Word.

I would set objectives to approach God's Word from this direction and that direction. For example, I wanted to study God's Word in a way for learning more about God's character. I worked right through the Scriptures to understand what God is like. Then I studied the Word of God from another angle: what does God require of me? Then I would study the Bible from yet another angle: what is God's purpose for His church today? What kind of church does He intend to build in this world?

### **In God's Word, I see a new society of God's people**

In studying God's Word, I saw a vision of God's plan for His church: a new society of God's people. Oh, I got very excited! The fire burned in my heart!

I became a Christian in China where I spent seven years under the Liberation, and during which I saw the Communists try to build a new society. At first, everybody had to smelt iron in their backyards, but eventually this ended up as waste

because you cannot get usable iron out of it. We were supposed to wipe clean the whole existing society, and build it all back again. I do admire their attitude. They wanted to create a new society because they knew that the old one was not good. I sympathize with that. But they need to know where they are heading before they can assess whether their strategy will work or ruin a billion lives.

If God permits, we will implement a new society in the church in Montreal and here in Hong Kong. We will work towards God's new society in which people don't live for themselves but for each other. If you care for yourself, you will have only one person to care for you. But in a society where everyone is living for the other, you will have many people to care for you. The root of God's Word transforms our lives, and when everyone has that root, there will be a new society.

Yet I see many churches in the world always begging for money. They need money for this building, and money for that cause, as if the church cannot live without money. I once went to a church, and the first thing I saw was a gigantic placard showing a thermometer. I was wondering what a thermometer was doing in a church. Was it so cold that you need this gigantic thermometer? On closer look, I saw money figures on it. The offering had reached \$500,000, with a long way yet to reach the goal of \$1,200,000. So don't forget to give an offering!

I have been to churches where the offering plate comes around three times. By the second round, I had already put all my offering in the first round. Then came a third offering plate. The "trick" is that if you intend to give \$3, just give \$1 each

time. But I put in \$3 all at once, in the first round. What is the idea behind three offering plates? I don't understand it.

The love of the brothers and sisters in our Montreal church really touches my heart. A new society is coming. They constantly give to those in need. We had a brother whose leg was amputated because of cancer. I suggested that he go to Switzerland to benefit from a natural treatment—a special water treatment—not a medical one, in order to get a rest as he was very tired. I had hardly mentioned this when the gifts kept pouring in for this brother! Two thousand eight hundred Canadian dollars in one weekend! I looked around at the church and wondered where all the money came from. We don't have any millionaires. And when someone's mother died, they all collected money for the family. When someone got married, the gifts were coming in for this new couple!

When I was about to leave Montreal for Hong Kong, I knew they were going to start a collection again. I was begging them the Sunday before my departure, "Please don't give me anything because I don't have a need." I was wondering whether I should kneel on the platform! It was to no avail because the treasurers passed me a gift that was enough to cover my flight to come here and go back. I was begging the people not to give, because I was afraid that they won't have anything to eat! Since begging didn't work, I had to "threaten" them: "I'm going to visit your home at dinner time to see if you have enough food on the table!" So all in all, they collected money three times in one month for three different causes!

I don't know what to do with a church like that! You have to beg them not to give, and you can't win because, by God's grace, they are learning to care for one another. God's power is bringing into being a wonderful new society in which you never have to worry. When you get married and have no money, there is a whole family to support you. When a family member dies, you don't have to worry. When the mother of one of our sisters died, I was so touched to see the church comforting her, supporting her. Oh, my heart is full of joy! That is what the new society—God's family—is about. The root of God's Word reaches deep into the heart, transforming every life. So how do you like God's new society compared to what you see around you?

## **Have root: Be in constant touch with God**

I would like to close by discussing how this root affects our communion with God. Picture the root. A root remains planted in the ground. You don't pull it out, wash it, and stick it back into the ground. That would destroy the plant. It must be permanently fixed in the ground.

The true spiritual life is in constant communion with God, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, but always in touch with God. How is your spiritual life? Some people think of the spiritual life as praying once or twice a day, like making "day visits" to God. In the morning, you would say, "Hi God! I had a nice sleep. It will be a busy day, so I'm sorry I don't have much time to talk to You. You do understand, don't You?"

You know what life in Hong Kong is like. I already said good morning. If I have time in the evening, I might say goodnight.” This sounds funny, but isn’t it true to life? There is no root in such a person. Remember, the root is something permanently fixed.

Let’s change the picture. The Lord Jesus speaks of the branch abiding in the vine (John 15:4). The branch doesn’t just stay in the vine two minutes in the morning, goes away, and then comes back in the evening, does it? It must always remain grafted into the vine—into the Lord Jesus who is the way to God. If you find it strange that a new person in Christ can be in constant communion with God, you clearly have a problem understanding the root.

In the Old Testament, this root connection is called *walking with God*. Enoch walked with God. Noah walked with God. To walk with God doesn’t mean to visit Him once or twice a day for two or three minutes. It means that all through the day you are walking with Him and living with Him. And it is not just Enoch or Noah. Micah 6:8 says, “What does God require of you, Israel? That you love kindness and walk humbly with your God.”

This verse may ring quietly in our ears without ever reaching our hearts, because we still don’t have the root. We need to understand that the root is fixed permanently, and that you, with the new life in Christ, have to constantly draw strength from God. We don’t recharge the Christian life like a nickel-cadmium battery which you plug into the wall for recharging, then pull it out. The battery will have enough power for a few

hours, after which the meter will show the power going down. When you are fully charged in the morning, you are bright and smiling. Then the power decreases as the day progresses, and the smile grows weaker. By the time your power approaches zero, you get irritable, impatient, annoyed, and you need a recharge. This seems to me like drug addiction, with your Christian life taking a dose of drugs once in the morning and once in the evening. This is not the right understanding of the root.

## **Have power as God answers your prayers**

Finally, in regard to prayer and communing with God, many people gauge whether their prayer time is a success or a failure by whether they “feel” something. If prayer gives you a satisfying floating feeling, then the prayer time must have been a success! But at other times of prayer, your fellowship is as sweet as talking to a blank wall. You were plugged in, but the connection failed because you were looking for a feeling.

Does my arm seek a wonderful feeling when it is attached to my body? Normally it doesn't feel anything of that kind. But when I fall asleep on my arm, I sometimes wake up wondering where my arm is. The arm went to sleep, and when it restores connection with the body, you will know how uncomfortable the pins and needles are!

The point of this illustration is that when my arm is connected to my body in a normal and right way, I don't feel anything. But if the blood supply is cut off, I begin to feel

uncomfortable. When I commune with God, sometimes I feel wonderful things, but most of the time I don't feel anything. In fact, I don't want to feel anything. If I want to feel something, I can simply burn myself with a lit cigarette!

We are talking about life. When the life connection is functioning normally, I should not feel anything. But if my hand gets a cut or has a cancer, I would feel something.

In fact, what happens in prayer is quite different from an emotional feeling. What I know is that I am being charged with God's power all the time. When I pray for something, God answers. Isn't that better than a feeling? I can testify that not a day goes by without seeing God's power working. I see my wife's life being changed. The lives of the people I come into contact with are experiencing God's transforming power. That is the normal Christian life. When you see God's power at work, you don't seek emotional feelings. Feelings go up and down. Don't seek that.

I have experienced times of exceptionally sweet communion with God, and felt I was walking in Paradise, having wonderful fellowship with Him. I was as conscious of God walking next to me, as I am conscious of my translator who is standing with me right now! But I have never looked for a feeling. Never look for a feeling. If God wants to give me an experience, I thank Him for it. If He doesn't, I thank Him all the same. I don't need it.

People who need feelings are like addicts. I don't need feelings. I only need the power of life within me. How God's power is constantly manifested is beyond my understanding, but I know this: When you live this way with your root in constant

connection with God and in communion with Him, you will see His power changing other people's lives through you. The closer you walk with God, the greater that power. God's power will work right through you to break through to people who seem quite impossible to reach.

One of the deepest impressions in my life was when my mother came to God, which is so precious to me. She had been so resistant to the gospel. When I come home, she would ask me when I will be leaving. But God's power was working in me. Have you ever led your own parents to God? Do you know what that is like? My mother knelt down with me, with tears pouring down her face. So great was God's power working in her life that I just watched with amazement! Her whole life was transformed! I know what my mother was like before, and I know what she was like afterwards—a totally different person! Isn't that better than feelings, which come and go in a few minutes?

Draw power from God when you have this root planted in Him, by being united with Christ. Then you will see wonderful things happen, just as the Lord Jesus said in John 15:16 that those who follow him can ask his Father for what they want, and God will grant it to them.

## **Put your root down into Christ**

If God is not true, nobody would dare say what I have just said. This is something you can test any time, and if the test fails, you

can tell me to my face, “This is rubbish! I have put my root in God through Christ, but it doesn’t work!”

I have committed myself to God for over 20 years, so if that doesn’t work for me, my first responsibility would be to tell you that this is rubbish, and you should forget the whole thing. The least I can do for you is to tell you the truth. But the truth is that God is real and He does work! I have proved it all my life of walking with Him, and I am appealing to you to prove it for yourself.

Put your root down into Christ. Let the Word of God reach into your heart, into your innermost being, and let God transform you into a new person. Be in constant touch with God. When you live like that, ask what you will, and see if He will not answer. Then you will know whether God is speaking the truth or not.



## Chapter 9



# THE PARABLE OF THE WHEAT AND THE DARNEL

Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

Montreal, August 13, 1978

**T**oday we come to the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel in Matthew 13:24–30, along with its explanation in verses 36–43. First we read the parable which is given by the Lord Jesus:

He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed

in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’” (Matthew 13:24–30, ESV)

His explanation of the parable follows in verses 36–43:

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.” (Matthew 13:36–43, ESV)

## How do we understand the kingdom of God?

### **The kingdom of God means the kingship of God**

As you look at this parable, you will immediately see that it deals with two kinds of planting in the kingdom of God: one of wheat, the other of weed or tares. Correspondingly, I would like you to ponder on the observable differences between two types of people in the kingdom.

This parable is about the kingship of God, as seen in the opening words: “He put another parable before them, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven ...’” (v.31). The “kingdom of heaven” is Matthew’s parallel to Luke’s “kingdom of God”. People today are unfamiliar with the term “kingdom of God,” so they ask, “Is the kingdom of God the church? What does it mean?” The kingdom of God simply means God’s rule, God’s kingship.

The Revised Standard Version translates John 18:36 correctly as “My kingship is not of this world,” whereas the Authorized Version (KJV) has, “My kingdom is not of this world.” The English word “kingdom” for this sense is somewhat archaic, whereas “kingship” is more understandable today. This parable, like many of Jesus’ parables, is about God’s kingship, God’s rule, God’s government in the world.

### **The kingdom of God can be given or taken away**

It will take many sessions to expound the kingdom of God, but we can turn to Matthew 21:43 which is a good verse for

understanding what “kingdom” means. Here the Lord Jesus says to the Jews:

Therefore I say to you, the **kingdom** of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.  
(NKJV)

Instead of “kingdom,” you can read the statement with the word “kingship,” and it will say the same thing:

Therefore I say to you, the **kingship** of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.

I hope that you as a Christian would truly understand what God’s kingdom or God’s kingship means. What does it mean? For one thing, we notice that the kingdom of God is not equivalent to the church, for the kingdom can be taken away from a nation and given to another. God’s kingship was taken away from Israel, and then given to this new nation, the church, which is called “a holy nation” in 1 Peter 2:9.

In Scriptural teaching, the kingship of God can be given to you, but it can also be taken away. The kingship of God is not some kind of permanent possession that you can keep for good. God was King over Israel, but He took His kingship away from Israel and gave it to the church. That is Paul says in Romans chapters 9 to 11, especially in 11:17–18, which says that Israel was broken off, and now Christians are planted into the tree despite not being originally part of the tree. It is another picture that says the same thing, namely, taking away the kingdom and giving it to another.

## **Privileges and responsibilities**

Having God as your King is a supreme privilege because it means that you have entered into a special relationship with God as Israel had. Other nations had kings, but Israel had God as King, for Israel stood in a special relationship with God. It was through the covenant that He became their God and they became His people. We likewise become God's people and receive God's kingdom through the New Covenant.

Have you received God's kingdom? That will depend on whether God is King of your life. Having God as King of your life brings responsibilities and supreme privileges. What are the privileges? God will bring all the blessings of eternal life, the fruit of the Spirit, and holiness, into your life if He is King of your life. But if God doesn't reign in your life, you are not part of His kingdom. So there are Christians and then there are "Christians," this being the point of this parable on God's kingship.

## **Two stages to the kingdom of God**

Furthermore, we need to be aware that there are two stages to God's kingdom or kingship. One is the present stage, the other is the future stage. The first part of the parable is about the present stage, whereas the last part, verse 30, speaks of a future stage when all evildoers will be gathered out of the kingdom, and God will establish His kingdom in judgment and justice.

That this parable is exceedingly important is seen in the closing words, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," which when used by the Lord Jesus always indicates that what he has

just said is important. Some have ears, but do not hear. Regarding those who have ears to hear, who are Jesus' sheep, and who have God as King of their lives, Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice."

The second reason for the importance of this parable lies in the fact that it is the only parable, along with the Parable of the Sower, for which an explanation is given. Whereas the other parables are not given an explanation, the Lord Jesus explains this parable; hence it is a foundation parable, just like the Parable of the Sower.

## **Come to Jesus' teaching with an open mind**

The more I study the teaching of the Lord Jesus, the more I am amazed by its depth, riches and power. Today we will pick out the central elements of this parable and look at them. But I am also amazed that this parable is usually not expounded in detail in the church today. How many of you have heard this parable expounded in a systematic fashion? I have been a Christian for 20 years, and I seldom hear Jesus' teaching expounded meaningfully anywhere. It seems that preachers stick to a handful of verses from Paul, and have little use for those outside these limited few verses. You cannot preach the Word of God like that, or else you will be completely lopsided by dwelling on the same few verses all the time. You must preach the full Word of God, the whole counsel of God. That is why we are studying all of Jesus' teaching, seeking to understand it by the Spirit's

guidance, and not merely selecting a few passages here and there.

The more I study the Lord Jesus' teaching and compare it with the church's teaching today, the more I see that if you start with the church's teaching, you will be unable to expound Jesus' teaching properly, because your mind will be closed to what it says. If you come to Bible with certain fixed dogmas and doctrines in your mind, this will prevent you from understanding the Lord's teaching. This was what happened to me. When I first studied the Lord Jesus' teaching, I could not understand it. It was speaking a language I did not understand because my mind had been taught certain doctrines and dogmas. My doctrines were in conflict with the Lord's teaching, so I shut out his teaching, something that happens all too often in the church today.

I say this by way of warning: Unless you come with an open mind and put away your dogmas and doctrines, you will not understand Jesus' teachings. Some pastors like to say, "Teach the people dogmas and doctrines." Yes indeed you can teach dogmas and doctrines, but whose dogmas and whose doctrines? Are we going to teach someone's dogmas? Dogmas are formulations and definitions made by man, and once you accept them, you won't accept anything else. That is why pastors are keen that you should be given dogmas, because this will fix your thinking in a particular way.

If we have to speak of dogmas, I wish we had only one dogma, and that is to accept as true whatever Jesus says. That is enough for me. I am going to stick by this. His words are

spirit and life! (John 6:63) I won't allow anybody's dogma or doctrine to decide whether I accept Jesus' teaching as he taught it. If any dogma can be expounded in the light of his teaching without disagreement between them, that would be wonderful! But I won't go back to the old days when my mind was so filled with doctrines and dogmas that I was unable to understand the Lord Jesus' teaching, with my mind closed to it.

For example, if you come to the Word of God with the standard church teaching that eternal life is attained through a faith that does not require holiness, with holiness being a "second stage" of the Christian life, you will find it impossible to accept Jesus' teaching. You are not going to listen to him because you have decided in advance what is true and what is not. This is the disaster!

All too often today, when one speaks of doctrines or dogmas, it means the doctrines of Calvin, the doctrines of Augustine, the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. If you are Catholic, you would hold on to the doctrines of Catholicism, and won't listen to what the Bible has to say. If you already believe in purgatory, which is a dogma of the Catholic Church, what would you do when you read the Bible and find no purgatory in it? You will say, "It doesn't matter that the Bible says nothing about purgatory. The Catholic Church says there is purgatory, and I accept their dogma."

The Roman Catholic Church used to say that there is no salvation outside their church. Then they modified that statement at the council called Vatican II, but that used to be a dogma. You see, human doctrines can be changed! So which is

right, the doctrine before Vatican II or the doctrine after Vatican II?

To take another example, a common definition of faith is: “We are saved by faith *alone*, with no need for holiness.” When I preach holiness, people would say, “Don’t talk about holiness, lest you preach salvation by works!”

Do you see how dogma has closed our minds to the teaching of the Lord Jesus? I only ask that each of us come with an open heart. Whose dogmas or doctrines are we teaching? Those who promote doctrines like to say, “Let us teach the doctrines of Calvin,” as though Calvin’s doctrines are equivalent to the Word of God. Or the Roman Catholic says, “Let us teach the doctrines of the Catholic Church,” as though its doctrines are equivalent, even superior, to the Word of God.

What will this lead to? It will be as what the Lord Jesus says to the Pharisees, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!” (Mark 7:9) To the Pharisees, the word “tradition” simply means doctrines. You only need to look at the Mishnah to see how they push the Word of God aside to hold on to their doctrines.

## **The totally committed: changed, sanctified, saved**

I am going to expound what the Lord Jesus teaches about salvation in concise terms, and let you compare it with what the church teaches, to see if they are teaching the same thing.

In the teaching of the Lord Jesus, we are saved through a faith that is a total commitment to God, expressed in following Christ, the One sent by God (John 17:3) and who is under God's authority (Mt. 8:8-9). Jesus expresses this in words which cannot be mistaken: "He who does not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me" (Mt. 10:38). Unless a person imitates the Lord Jesus in committing himself totally and without reserve to God as King of his life, and doing whatever God commands him to do, even to the point of taking up the cross to be crucified, he is not worthy of the Lord Jesus.

How plain are the words of Jesus! But we don't listen to his teaching because our doctrines have predisposed our minds to reject it. "It is impossible that Jesus would demand so much from us. He gives us everything but will not demand anything from us." That is the teaching today, and I will leave you to decide whether that is what the Lord Jesus teaches.

What about the one who fulfills Jesus' teaching? When he comes to God and says, "Lord God, I repent of my sins. I will take up my cross and follow the Lord Jesus, so that You are Lord of my life," he is born again of the Spirit of God. His life is transformed because God's life comes into his soul. That is regeneration in the Biblical sense, and it means transformation. You are no longer the person you were before; you are a changed person.

The new birth mentioned in John 3:5 is often preached today. But it seems to me that it is often taught as being merely a new status, not a transformation of life. But the Lord Jesus teaches a deep and total change, in the same way that Paul

understands the matter: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). The new creation is also preached today, but often as little more than a new status.

But a new creation is more than a new status. If I create something anew, that thing is changed in itself. A new creature means that it is changed. It is not just a new legal status before God, which is what most preachers limit it to. Through faith expressed in total commitment, you are transformed and become a new person in Christ (John 3:3–5). This is the powerful and dynamic teaching of the Lord Jesus, in contrast to the feeble and watered-down message we hear today.

What will be the result of this change? This transformation, which is so complete in its depth, does not mean that you become totally sinless, but it does mean that God’s Spirit so works in your life that you produce the fruit of a new life which is holiness. Hebrews 12:14 says, “without holiness, no man will see God.” I have quoted this verse again and again so that you may get its message, which sums up so perfectly the teaching of Scripture. If your life has been transformed by the Holy Spirit of God in you, you are bound to be holy!

God says, “You shall be holy for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16; Lev. 11:44–45). The word “perfect” is another word for “holy” in Scripture, which is why the Lord Jesus says, “Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). God is holy, God is perfect. Both the phrases “be holy” and “be perfect” are used in the Bible, and are a summary of the Lord Jesus’ teaching.

## The good seed: God's children who glorify Him

Let us get to the central points of the parable. First we notice that this parable is in effect a *prophecy* which illustrates in picture language the kingdom of God. The Lord Jesus says that there are two kinds of plant. One is wheat, the good seed which the Lord Jesus sows into the world: "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world." (Mt. 13:37–38a) The good seed are the sons of the kingdom, the children of God who live under God's kingship. This symbolism is different from that of the Parable of the Sower where the seed is the Word of God.

How does a seed grow? John 12:24 speaks of a seed that falls into the ground and dies, so it grows by dying. There is total commitment again. Nobody is prepared to die who is not totally committed. The true Christian is one who is prepared to die, for he is dead to the world and has finished with the life of sin. Only this kind of person can live the kind of life that fulfills God's Word given to this world. We are God's message to the world. People have to look at our lives if they are going to turn to God.

Hence wheat is easy to understand; it represents the true children of God, those who genuinely live under His kingship, having yielded to God as King of their lives.

Jesus sows into the world those who live under God's kingship. If you and I are children of God, we are God's seed sown into the world to bring forth fruit for His glory, as Jesus says in Matthew 5:16, "that men may see your good works and

glorify your Father who is in heaven.” Yet our church dogmas and doctrines influence us to regard “good works” as a dirty word. Among evangelicals today, “good works” has become a dirty word. But it is not a dirty word to the Lord Jesus who says, “that men may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

Why would people give glory to God when they see your good works? When people see your good works, you would expect them to give glory to you. How is it that they give glory to God? It comes from a distinction in the types of good works. The right kind of good works stems from holiness and carry God’s presence. Even the non-Christian can tell that the good works are done by God’s power, and that the holiness in you is something that comes from God, not from yourself. They may not know about the Holy Spirit, but they do know that the holiness in you is not something you worked up in yourself, but something that God has done in you.

So perfect are the words of the Lord Jesus that even by this statement he has already indicated the kind of good works he means: that which stems from the Spirit of God, and causes people to give glory to God, not to you. Have you ever known a righteous man of God? Do you give glory to him? No, because you know that the holiness and beauty in his life is the holiness and beauty that comes from God. Without saying a word, a godly man has in his own life the capacity to deflect you to God and away from himself. That is the test of whether your holiness is one that comes from God. If people praise you instead, something must be wrong. But if people look at you

and say, “How wonderful God is!” then you have the right kind of holiness and the right kind of good works.

## **The darnel is found in God’s kingdom**

What then do the weeds represent? It is most important for us to have an accurate understanding of what the weeds are. We must not read our own ideas into the Word of God, but expound it with absolute precision.

After Jesus had sown good seed in the world, the enemy, who is the devil, comes along and sows weeds among the wheat. The weeds were not originally in the field, which is the world, but came later.

Do the weeds refer to non-Christians? If so, this would mean that the weeds would have been in the field long before Jesus sows good seeds, since unbelievers were in the world long before Christians appeared. But in the parable, we see the reverse chronology: the weeds were sown by the devil only *after* the good seed had been sown.

And where are the weeds sown? Among the wheat! The weeds are planted, with deliberate intent, among the wheat rather than somewhere else in the field.

We also see the words “gather out of His kingdom” in Matthew 13:41. In the kingdom there are the evildoers and causes of stumbling, so they have to be taken out. Wouldn’t this mean that unbelievers and evildoers are found in the kingdom of God? As we press on, we will see this point emerging ever more clearly.

What is translated as “weeds” in the Revised Standard Version, and as “tares” in the Authorized Version, are in fact darnel, a kind of plant that grows up looking very much like wheat. To the non-specialist, darnel is indistinguishable from wheat in the early stages of their growth. Even today, in all the Middle Eastern countries, darnel do not grow in the wild but among wheat. Some even think that darnel is a degenerate form of wheat, but other specialists disagree with that because wheat and darnel are structurally different. That is why in Matthew 13:26–27, the servants see the darnel in the field only after the plants have grown and borne fruit. They previously hadn’t seen the darnel even though it had been growing for a long time before their eyes. Then one day they said, “Look at this! The field is full of darnel!” They went to the master and said, “Did you not sow wheat in your field? How come there are darnel?” The darnel’s true character finally came out.

In this parable, the translation “tares” in the Authorized Version is inaccurate, but we cannot blame the translators for this because back in 1611, they did not know enough about this Greek word, *zizanion* (ζιζάνιον). The translation “tares” is inaccurate because tares belong to the bean or pea family, and bear no resemblance to wheat. Even a non-expert like me can immediately tell the difference between tares and wheat. But we are talking about a kind of plant that you cannot distinguish from wheat until the grain appears. So the Authorized Version’s rendering “tares” is quite inaccurate.

The same goes for RSV’s translation “weeds.” Have you ever seen weed bearing fruit? Weed does not bear fruit at all. But

RSV probably chose this word because the general reader would not know the technical name for this kind of weed, since few of us are botanists. So RSV deliberately chose this general word “weeds.” But if you are a thinking person, you would immediately ask, “Since when do weeds bear fruit? I have never seen weeds bearing fruit or grain!”

The Chinese translation *bai zi* (稗子) has much the same problem. It refers to a type of weed that grows in rice fields, not wheat fields. It looks like rice plant while the rice is growing, so the Chinese translators have decided to speak of a rice field in which weeds are coming up. Unfortunately for them, the Lord Jesus is talking about wheat; so speaking of rice weed growing among wheat is problematic.

In fact the technical name of the plant is “the bearded darnel”. What is darnel? The Chinese term for it is revealing: *du mai* (毒麥), which means “poisonous wheat”; this is a good translation of “darnel” for conforming to what experts say about the plant in the parable.

Let us consider the darnel, this “poisonous wheat,” which usually grows only in wheat fields. Darnel so closely resembles wheat that even an expert would have difficulty telling which is wheat and which is darnel until they produce fruit, the ears of grain. But before that, how would you tell them apart? By the kernel, which is black. If you bite it, it is bitter. You will be wise not to eat it because darnel grain is poisonous. Hence the Chinese term *du mai* “poisonous wheat” is accurate in its description of darnel. Darnel looks like wheat but is poisonous. Anyone who eats darnel mistaking it for wheat will end up with

dizziness, sleepiness, nausea, diarrhea, convulsions (cramps and shaking), gangrene (the rotting of various parts of your body) and even death. The fruit of darnel is black and poisonous, whereas the fruit of wheat is whitish and nourishing. This is very important for understanding this parable.

We are dealing with two plants that look similar but are completely different in essence. How then do you tell the difference between these plants? By what the Lord Jesus says in Matthew 12:33, “By their fruit you will know them,” for a good tree yields good fruit, and a bad tree yields bad fruit.

Both wheat and darnel grow in the kingdom of God, that is, inside the church, allegedly under the kingship of God. I say “allegedly” because there are evildoers in the kingdom of God at the present time, as this parable and others tell us. We are reminded of the Parable of the Wedding Feast in Matthew 22:1–14, in which a man went to a wedding feast without a wedding garment, and was slung out of the feast. What a tragic situation!

The next thing to notice is the close relationship of the darnel and the wheat. The two are intertwined in their relationship to each other, indicating that they both function inside the kingdom of God. That is why the Lord Jesus warns that pulling up the darnel will also pull up the wheat. You have to leave the darnel there for now until the Judgment.

Where do these darnel come from? Jesus says, “These are sown by the enemy.” He identifies this enemy as “the devil”—Satan. In his war against God’s kingship, Satan sows darnel in

God's kingdom. Bear in mind that the darnel represent people as is the case with wheat.

The darnel do not represent unbelievers. The devil sows, into the church, people who in essence are not genuine Christians, yet have the outward appearance and behavior of Christians. They behave like Christians up to a point, and talk like Christians up to a point, but they are not Christians in their hearts. As Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:5, they have the outward appearance of godliness, but do not have the power of God's life inside them.

## **The darnel think they are genuine Christians**

The next point we have to develop is that although the darnel are not genuine Christians, these people don't necessarily know that they are not true Christians. As we study this parable, we realize a further tragedy: The darnel think they are wheat! It is precisely because they look so much like wheat that they believe themselves to be wheat. That is the greatest tragedy of all.

It is not that these people are in the church with a deliberate intent to destroy the church. They are simply people who are not genuine Christians, yet function inside the church and think they are genuine Christians. In this prophetic parable, the Lord is saying that where God works, Satan also works. Where God is bringing forth life, Satan is bringing forth death.

That raises a vital question: How do you tell whether you are wheat or darnel? Don't reassure yourself by saying, "I am a church member," or "I'm active in church," or "I've been

baptized,” and all this. That is no consolation at all, for darnel are found inside the church.

There are two different kinds of life in the church: the life of the wheat versus the life of the darnel. One comes from God, the other from the enemy, identified as the devil in the parable. Non-genuine Christians are found in the church even in abundance, for when Satan sows darnel among wheat, he doesn't just sow one or two seeds. Why does Satan do this? In order that the darnel—the false Christians—will choke the wheat, those who have made a genuine response to the gospel.

You may be confident that you are a true Christian, but are you a true Christian in God's eyes? It is not whether you are a true Christian in your own eyes or my own eyes. Paul says, “I do not even judge myself” (1 Cor. 4:3) and “Let a man examine himself” (11:28). The key is whether I am a Christian *in God's eyes*.

## **The darnel do not submit to God's kingship**

How do we tell whether we are wheat or darnel? In Matthew 13:41, in the explanation of the parable, we read: “The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers.” The darnel are the stumbling blocks inside the church. The Greek word *skandalon* (σκάνδαλον, “stumbling blocks”) is here translated as “causes of sin.” The other Greek word *anomia* (ἀνομία) in this parable is translated as “evildoers” in the RSV, but that is not accurate because *anomia* literally means “doers of lawlessness.” But we

can appreciate why the RSV rendered “doers of lawlessness” as “evildoers,” for if you commit lawlessness, you are an evildoer. As we examine how this word is used elsewhere in the New Testament, an important understanding of the darnel emerges. This same word *anomia* is used in Matthew 7:23. Let us read Matthew 7:21–23.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name and do mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, **you workers of lawlessness.**’” (Matthew 7:21–23, ESV)

Notice that “you workers of lawlessness” (in boldface) do not refer to unbelievers *but to Christian workers!* How striking! These people call Jesus, “Lord, Lord,” but he will say to them, “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven—the future kingdom—but only those who do God’s will now.”

This passage speaks of “that day”—a day of judgment in which many will be found to be “evildoers” despite calling Jesus, “Lord, Lord,” and despite having prophesied in Jesus’ name, casting out demons in his name, and doing mighty works of healing in his name. Here the term “evildoers” is from the same Greek word for “evildoers” in Matthew 13:41, that is,

doers of lawlessness. Here we see an allusion to the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel.

These doers of lawlessness are in fact Christian workers rather than unbelievers. They call Jesus “Lord” with sincerity, at least to some extent, but they don’t do God’s will. Jesus’ desire for us is that we honor him by obeying his teaching faithfully. This is the Biblical teaching. I don’t care what kind of dogma or theology you hold. You can teach dogma, doctrines, whatever you like, but you had best see to it that your doctrines are Scriptural, for if they are not, your doctrines will land you right into the situation of these people. On that Day of Judgment, they will end up in the flames of fire.

Did those who call Jesus “Lord” have faith? Certainly. Anybody who does things in Jesus’ name has faith. They cast out demons in Jesus’ name. They believed in Jesus’ name through which God’s power is given to them. They had faith. Do you have that kind of faith? They could prophesy in Jesus’ name. Do you have faith to prophesy? They certainly had faith, but they did not do God’s will. Prophesying is not the equivalent of doing God’s will. Doing miracles—and there are many faith healers today—is not the equivalent of doing God’s will.

Doing God’s will is living a life of holiness. Now you can see why the Scriptures emphasize holiness. Living a life of holiness means that you live totally under God’s kingship such that He is truly King of your life. That is the Scriptural teaching. Have we got ears to hear? Or have our doctrines blinded us to God’s truth? Alas for the church, what has happened to us? Is God’s truth not plain enough to us? Unless we are committed to

doing His will and are totally committed to Him, we are in danger of finding ourselves to be darnel!

Let me sum up. Unless you crown God the King of your life, you won't be saved, not even if you do miracles by faith in Jesus' name. It is not the faith to do miracles that saves, but the faith in Jesus Christ by which one lives under God's rule (cf. Gal. 2:20b).

Distinguish so-called "faith" from Biblical faith carefully. The apostle James says, "Show me your faith by your works, for I want to see what kind of faith you are talking about" (cf. James 2:18). If your faith is the type that does miracles, that alone won't save you. What God requires of you is a faith in Jesus Christ that acknowledges God as King in your life moment by moment, day by day, though it might not be as spectacular as doing miracles. If in addition to that faith you also do miracles through the God-empowered name of Jesus, that would be wonderful! But a faith that performs miracles is not a substitute for saving faith.

I hope that we can by God's grace see what God is saying to us. What matters to God is *what you are*. What *you do* is not as important to Him. I say this as warning to the young people who think that by being busy in the church, running around organizing this and that, you are a good Christian. Some people who have only recently come to this church have said, "I want to do something in the church," and if they are not given something to do, they will go somewhere else. That is fine with me. By all means go, because you need to understand that God wants to see *what you are*, first of all. I want to see *what you are*

before you are given something to do. It is easy to find things for people to do, but this can harm them more than be a blessing to them, for they will think that they are wonderful Christians by their many activities. “I am president of the Chinese Christian Fellowship, I am running this, I am organizing that, I am leading Bible studies.” I don’t doubt that you are busy, but what are you in yourself? Are you wheat or are you darnel? The activities give you the outward appearance of a true Christian, but what are you inwardly?

## **The darnel thought they will be saved**

Notice the tragedy: The people in Matthew chapter 7 thought that they will be saved! On the Day of Judgment, they will even bring up their works of miracles, saying, “Lord, Lord, didn’t we do this and that in your name?” They honestly thought that they will be saved because they did all this. They had sincere faith in Jesus, but he rejects them.

The Day of Judgment will be a fearful day of surprises. Many will be thinking, “My seat is reserved for me in heaven,” but Jesus will say to them, “I don’t know who you are. Depart from me! Who are you? You are not wheat!” The tragedy of it is that they were led to believe that they were true Christians.

The devil is the father of lies. Are you falling for his lie that you can be a true Christian without holiness, and without having God’s kingship in your life? Then you are in the most pitiful condition of all.

To put it simply, the parallel between wheat and darnel is the parallel between two kinds of people in the church: those who believe in Jesus as Savior, and those who believe in Jesus as Lord *and* Savior. If you are a Christian simply because you believe that Jesus is your Savior, saying, “Jesus is there to do something for me, like getting me to heaven, which is all I want,” then you have believed a lie, and you are in danger of being darnel. The darnel want eternal life, they want salvation, but they don’t want to do God’s will, or follow Jesus as Lord of their lives.

A.W. Tozer, that great servant of God who wrote many wonderful books, made this statement in his book, *The Root of the Righteous*: “The great heresy in the teaching of the Church today is to teach Jesus as Savior without teaching him as Lord (Acts 2:36) at the same time.”

Jesus is Savior only to those to whom Jesus is Lord. The Bible often speaks of him as “Lord and Savior,” in that order. Lord first, then Savior. You don’t have him as Savior without having him as Lord, so you must commit yourself to following him totally. So often today, in the teaching of the church, evangelists and pastors like to say, “Accept Jesus as Savior,” but not a word is said about submitting to him as Lord. The preaching of Christ’s lordship is reserved for consecration or discipleship gatherings: you first become some sort of Christian, then later become a “higher” Christian by consecrating yourself to God. In this teaching, even if you don’t go on to the “higher” stage, you will still be saved. They leave out the part about submitting to the lordship of Christ as Christ submits to the kingship of God, and so people make use of Jesus to save themselves.

Maybe one day, if they are up to it, they may say, “I now also have Jesus as Lord, but this is not a necessity.”

Alas! Anyone who teaches this is teaching the devil’s lie, as the great servant of God, A.W. Tozer, has repeatedly warned about. But that is the standard teaching today, isn’t it? I was brought up in this teaching. If you and I are nurtured in this teaching, we will close our eyes to the Word of God. But this teaching is wholly unscriptural. Unless Jesus is Lord right from the start of your Christian life, he is not your Savior at all. If you don’t do God’s will as Jesus did, you won’t find salvation in Christ. The darnel will not enter the kingdom of God in the final stage of the harvest. All this is exceedingly important and basic for us to understand about salvation.

When I preach the Word of God, people would say of me, “He confuses consecration with justification!” I have confused nothing. I may appear to be a fool to them, just the Corinthian church made Paul appear as a fool in their eyes (2 Cor. 11:16–18). There are not many who have spent as much time in theology as I have, and I am not going to make elementary mistakes of this kind. I confused nothing, for this is Scriptural teaching. Dividing justification into two stages—accepting Jesus as Savior and then as an option submitting to him as Lord—is simply Satan’s lie!

## **The darnel are blinded by religion**

I want you to understand this because it concerns your salvation. The darnel were sown by Satan. They sincerely believe

that they are Christians and are in the kingdom of God. This will continue until they are thrown out.

The darnel are the sons of the devil, but do you think they know that they are sons of the devil? Alas, no! You only need to read John 8:39–44 to realize this. The Jews were saying to Jesus, “Abraham is our Father,” but the Lord replied to these chosen people of God, and to the Pharisees who were the most religious keepers of the law, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do what Abraham did.” Abraham followed God as King in his life. He did whatever God told him to do, and went wherever God sent him. Then in verse 44, Jesus says, “You are of your father the devil.” Non-believers are not normally called sons of the devil, but that is exactly how these religious people with their own righteousness are described. Search for yourself to see that the Bible does not call non-believers “sons of the devil.” Sometimes you get the shock of your life when you see these things in the Bible.

The Lord Jesus did not say this to insult them, but in the hope of giving them a true diagnosis so that they may be saved. You have to tell a sick man that he is sick, or he will think he is healthy. You may have cancer, yet still feel healthy up to a point. My father was feeling fit before he died of cancer. One day he went for a routine checkup, and the doctor said, “What is this lump here?” He said, “What lump?” “This lump here.” “Oh, it’s nothing! It doesn’t hurt.” Two months later, he was dead. Yet he felt fine at his medical checkup.

It proves absolutely nothing that you feel fine. The question is, What is your true spiritual state? Would you know whether a disease is killing you? Not necessarily.

When Jesus tells them, “You are of your father, the devil,” he is not trying to insult them, but simply saying, “Come to your senses. Unless you receive God as King of your life, you will remain as sons of the devil, and you will perish in your sins.”

In John 9:41, he says to them, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but because you say you see, your guilt remains.” They thought that they could see, and that everyone else was blind. Nothing is more frightful in our lives than to think that we are what we are not. That is the utmost tragedy! God save us from that! May I ever come before God and say, “Lord, I just want to be open to You. I beg of You, just show me what I truly am, not what I think I am.”

## **Distinguish the wheat and darnel by their fruit**

How then can we know ourselves as we truly are? Does it depend on our inner feelings to guess whether we are true Christians? Thanks be to God we are not left in that desperate state! In this parable, in verse 13:26, the Lord Jesus tells us how to tell: When fruit comes out, we can see the difference between the wheat and the darnel.

What is fruit in the Bible? You already know it is the fruit of the Spirit. It is also holiness. Do you have holiness in your life? Or do you go home and quarrel with your brother or sister? Or

quarrel with fellow Christians or with your landlord? Do you behave like a non-Christian at college? Do you keep losing your temper? How do you behave? Do you know whether you are saved? You will know by your fruit (Mt. 7:20).

You may think I am a wonderful Christian, but I know for myself whether I am one or not. I look at myself and see just how much I have failed, yet I also see how much God, by His grace, has made me what I am. If I see any good in me, I can only say with Paul, “By the grace of God, I am what I am” (1 Cor. 15:10). I know what I was before versus what I am now. I know what God has done in my life, so I say, “Thanks be to God.”

You will know that you are a true Christian when others begin to see a change in you, and you genuinely know that this change is the result of God’s work in your heart. You are bearing the fruit of the Spirit in your life, and, as Romans 8:16 says, the Spirit of God witnesses with your spirit that you are a child of God. You have a powerful assurance because God’s Spirit witnesses with your spirit, and is at the same time producing fruit powerfully.

Do you still lose your temper? How do you behave? Don’t say that your behavior doesn’t matter, because that is exactly what Satan wants you to believe, that you are going to be saved. How you behave is an indication of whether you are a new creature. “Without holiness, no man shall see God” (Heb. 12:14)—the holiness that God’s Spirit works in your life.

Are you wheat or are you darnel? Darnel is poisonous, so it must be carefully separated from the wheat. If errors are made

during the reaping process, and some of the darnel is mixed with the wheat and ground into flour, people are going to get very sick when they eat this mixed flour. That is why the darnel has to be carefully separated and burned. I pray that God will help you understand this message, to open your eyes and mine, so that we together may ever say, “Search me, O God, and know my heart, and see if there is any wicked way in me” (cf. Psalm 139:23–24).

A final point: These evildoers are not people who go around committing things like murder or adultery. Don’t say to yourself, “Well, I don’t commit murder, I don’t commit adultery, so I’m not one of these evildoers.” Don’t deceive yourself. The word “evildoers” is even applied to those who perform miracles, with the same Greek used of the Pharisees (Mt. 23:28). As we have seen, the Greek word for “evildoers” actually means “doers of lawlessness,” namely, those who don’t live under God’s law or kingship. They believe what they want, and do what they want.

Keep all these matters in mind so that holiness may be perfected in your life, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 7:1–2:

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God. Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. (2 Cor. 7:1–2, ESV)

## **Why not separate the wheat and the darnel?**

Why does God tolerate a mixed church in which the good and the bad coexist? Why doesn't God separate the darnel from the wheat? Why does He stop His servants from pulling up the darnel? The answer to this question lies in understanding the nature of darnel.

### **1. Darnel are hard to distinguish**

We have seen how difficult it is to distinguish between darnel and wheat. Can you tell which is wheat and which is darnel? We saw in John 8:33f that the Jews and Pharisees thought they were sons of God because they were sons of Abraham. But the Lord Jesus said to them, "You are of your father the devil" (v.44), a most shocking and straightforward answer. He also says, "If you are sons of Abraham, spiritually speaking, and hence sons of God, you would live and do as Abraham lived and did."

When God said "Go," Abraham went without asking questions. He did whatever God told him to do. He was a man of faith which is total commitment. He obeyed God totally.

Jesus is saying to the Jews, "Don't say to yourselves that you are sons of God, for you don't even do the Father's will." That is exactly the teaching in Matthew 7:21f. If we are God's children, we would do His will. The Spirit of God in us will motivate us to live the kind of life that Jesus lived.

## 2. It's not up to us to judge

How do you tell whether a person is doing the Father's will or not? Jesus can tell, but can you? To some extent we can, but we cannot be sure. So it is not up to us to judge. I cannot say to you, "You're not doing a few things right, so I declare that you are not a son of God. You are darnel, not wheat." I must not make that kind of judgment.

Many Christians don't do God's will, or live under His kingship. They do what they want, and might not even behave like Christians. But because they have not committed any serious sins, they are like those in Matthew 7:21f who say, "Lord, Lord," without having done the Father's will, yet they also don't commit murder or adultery. You cannot apply church discipline on them because they have not done anything terribly or seriously wrong.

But most non-Christians don't commit murder or adultery either. They live decent lives when you look at them from the outside.

On what practical basis do you remove the darnel from the church? If you test their faith and ask, "Do you believe in the name of Jesus?" the darnel would say "Yes" just as those who say "Lord, Lord" but do not do the Father's will. Anyone can say, "Lord, Lord."

The Israelites said the right things too: "This people honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me." (Isaiah 29:13) They have "a form of godliness," so on what basis do you judge them and remove them from the church? Once you understand the nature of darnel, you will see that you cannot

simply remove them. It is because they are so hard to distinguish, but also because it's not for us to judge. It is my task to preach the gospel, not to judge people.

## **The darnel cause great harm to the church**

Do the darnel cause harm to the church? Certainly! In what ways do they harm the church? It is not by anything they do outwardly. If you look at a field of wheat with darnel in it, the darnel is not doing any obvious harm to the wheat. The darnel stands there and the wheat stands there. The darnel is not hurting the wheat in any obvious way, so it can say, "I have not done anything bad." That is the problem.

So where is the damage being done? The parable tells us it is being done underground, invisibly. Their roots absorb the nutrients that the wheat could use, slowing the growth of the wheat. Some of the darnel roots may even choke the wheat, as we saw in the Parable of the Sower. Darnel cause real damage. They damage the witness of the church. The church ought to be shining much more brightly than it does. Why is it not shining? Well, look at the church, it is full of darnel. It is hard for the church to shine with all the darnel in it.

Do we then remove the darnel? The parable says if you pull up the darnel, you will pull up the wheat with it, since the wheat has its roots tangled with those of the darnel. If you pull up the one, you will pull up the other. In the very attempt to remove all false Christians from the church, you could damage many true Christians. That is what the Lord Jesus warns against. He

doesn't want even one true Christian—one true disciple—to be damaged. He cares for every one of them. So what can we do about the darnel? Nothing! We have to wait for the harvest when the Lord Jesus will send his angels to separate the wheat from the darnel. Until then, we'll simply have to wait.

## **What is God's purpose for not removing the darnel?**

You may protest, "I understand that we cannot remove the darnel from the wheat, for it is hard to distinguish the entangled roots, and there is the risk of hurting some of the wheat. But why doesn't God do anything about it? Why doesn't He strike down these false Christians? Or purge His church so that it will become what it should be?"

Oh, how we long for that! Like the disciples in Luke 9:54, we want to call down fire from heaven and say, "Burn the darnel! Let God create a special kind of bug—as in biological warfare—that will eat up only the darnel and leave the wheat standing. It is not beyond God's ability to create a bug that will destroy the darnel without uprooting the wheat. Why doesn't God do anything about the darnel?" That is the way we think.

## **True Christians are toughened by persecution in the church**

Ponder for a moment. Doesn't God have a purpose in all this? What is that purpose? First and foremost, it is that in the

struggle to survive against the darnel, the wheat will become a stronger kind of wheat. The struggle for survival has a strengthening effect. A tree that grows on a mountainside, blown by every fierce wind, will have powerful roots. Such a tree is strong, and can withstand the weather. But a tree that lives in a sheltered place topples when the storm comes because it has never put its roots deep down to anchor itself upon the rock.

Trials are unpleasant. We don't like trials or sufferings. We don't like to be tested by fellow Christians, so we say, "I'm willing to take all this from non-Christians. They can do what they want to me, but I don't want to be persecuted by those who call themselves Christians!" If you have been following the Biblical teaching, you would know that those who persecute you most severely are those who call themselves Christians. This has always been the case down through the centuries. You suffer most in the hands of those who call themselves Christians. As I have said many times, beloved brothers and sisters, understand this or else you may fall. This is why the Lord tells us, "You are going to have trials. There are darnel among the wheat, and they will test your patience to no end, and choke you if you are not careful. So put your roots down deep. Draw deep from God's grace, because His grace is sufficient for you."

When I was a few months old as a Christian, I saw the behavior of certain "Christians," and I nearly went down. I didn't want to be a Christian because these Christians disgusted me.

Many have had similar experiences, like the non-Christians who tell me, "I don't want to have anything to do with Christians because I have seen Christians who disgust me!"

I completely sympathize with these non-Christians because that was exactly how I felt. I know some non-Christians who are nicer than Christians, and more considerate and more generous. I am sure that you have also known some such non-Christians. No wonder the non-Christians say, “Who wants to be a Christian? Look at these Christians!” I completely sympathize with them, for I know exactly how they feel. I didn’t want to be a Christian because of such people.

### **Look to Jesus**

Then I began to look to Jesus (Heb. 12:2). My heart became attracted to him, so I don’t look at these so-called “Christians” anymore.

After I become a Christian, I lived with an elderly Christian woman. Oh, dear me! More than once I nearly decided I have had enough of Christianity. She had been a Christian for 20 years, and I only two months, but her behavior was disgraceful! I kept on thinking about her like this until God said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you (2 Cor. 12:9). Follow Jesus’ example. The church has all kinds of disreputable people, but don’t mind what they do.”

You will say, “But they have been Christians longer than I. Should they not be an example to me?” Yes, they ought to, but unfortunately that is often not the reality. They may be wheat that has become weak and sick, or they may be darnel. I don’t know, and it is not for me to judge. The Lord will separate them one day. As for me, I will keep my eyes on Jesus.

All through my Christian life, I would often encounter this problem. I don't have much problems with non-Christians. I have suffered minor persecution from them, but that is nothing compared with the problems I have with Christians who don't do God's will or live under His kingship. In time I came to realize that many of them are darnel. One after another, they fell away. As John says, "They went out from us because they were not of us" (1 John 2:19). So they fell away. People who were active youth leaders—prominent people in churches who organized this and that—where are they today? They are far from God! They don't even pretend to be Christians anymore, which is just as well for the church. Unfortunately, there are others who still call themselves Christians, yet don't live in total commitment to God. It is these who give us an awful lot of headaches. So bear this in mind.

### **The darnel test the wheat, resulting in stronger wheat**

Why doesn't God destroy all the darnel? God has a purpose in this. The darnel will try us to our limits, but thanks be to God, we will learn to put our roots down deeper into God to draw upon His grace. We will also look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2; cf. Rom. 15:5). We may want to remove the darnel, but God has a purpose in leaving them in the kingdom.

A related question is: Why doesn't God stop Satan from sowing darnel in the first place? Whether God allows Satan to sow the darnel, or whether God destroys the darnel after Satan

has sown them, both will come to the same thing. In either case, the fact remains that God allows the darnel to live in the field in the present age.

This doesn't make good agricultural sense. Farmers wouldn't want to sow darnel among the wheat for the purpose of producing a strong crop of wheat. But the Lord's parables are not designed to teach us agricultural logic, but to teach us spiritual truth and reality. In the wheat field, it might not work like that, but in the spiritual life, it does.

If we are starting to get discouraged, let us realize one thing. When we look around at the church today, we may wonder how the church could ever be the light of the world. What hope is there for a church that has superficial and non-genuine Christians? We easily get discouraged. But don't be discouraged! The Lord God is the Lord of the harvest. He knows what He is doing. Don't worry about the harvest, for He will fulfill His purposes. At the end of the parable is a great harvest: the wheat is brought in, and God's purpose is achieved, not only despite the darnel, but in a certain way because of it, for He then produces a strong and vigorous crop of wheat.

If we become discouraged, take heart, for the Lord Jesus gives us a further parable, the Parable of the Mustard Seed, which we will examine in the next chapter, to reinforce the important fact that God's purposes cannot be defeated.



## Chapter 10



# THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

Matthew 13:31–32

Montreal, August 20, 1978

He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” (Matthew 13:31–32, ESV)

### “It is the smallest of all seeds”

**T**he Lord Jesus constantly speaks in parables, and this Parable of the Mustard Seed is of considerable importance since it is found in all the synoptics, that is, the first three Gospels. The Parable of the Mustard Seed follows the Parable of the Wheat and Darnel precisely to provide us the

encouragement that we need. After looking at the Parable of the Wheat and Darnel, we might well become discouraged and say, “What future does the church have when it consists of such a mixed bunch of people?” Jesus’ answer is found in today’s parable, in Matthew 13:31–32.

We can imagine Jesus pointing to a mustard tree that is standing in the field, and then tells a parable, as he often does: “The kingdom of God can be pictured as this mustard tree. It was sown as a tiny seed, and now look, how it has grown!” In Palestine, the mustard plant can grow to a height of eight to ten feet. Ten feet would be nearly twice my height, which would make for a considerable tree growing out of this tiny mustard seed.

It is important to notice that we have yet another parable about seed. There are several parables about seed. We have the Parable of the Sower (Mt. 13:1–9), the Parable of the Growing Seed (Mk. 4:26–29), the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel (Mt. 13:24–30), and now the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mt. 13:31–32).

If you have studied some botany, you might say, “Wait a minute! The mustard seed may be very small, but it is not the smallest of all the seeds in the world. The poppy seed is smaller.” Yes, but the farmers in Palestine don’t grow poppy or smoke opium. To say that the poppy seed is smaller is quite beside the point of this parable. The mustard seed is not the smallest seed that exists, but the point is that it is the smallest seed that the Palestinian farmer sows.

## **The seed dies and rises: the teaching of salvation**

We now realize how many parables there are in which Jesus speaks of seed, and there is a good reason for that. I would like to pause for a moment to ponder on the significance of the seed. A seed is something wonderful! The more you understand Jesus' teaching about seed, the more you will understand the whole Scriptural teaching of salvation. So if you want to understand the teaching of salvation, you must understand Jesus' teaching on the seed.

The seed is sown into the ground; it dies or disintegrates in a certain way; it germinates; it bursts its body; and it rises again. It is a whole picture of burial, death, and resurrection. It is marvelous! Then new life literally comes forth from the burial, the death, and the resurrection of the seed. So Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is like a grain of seed." The kingdom may be small like a mustard seed sown into the ground; it disappears from view; it is buried; it dies; and it rises to new life. In the same way, the Lord Jesus died and was buried. He seemed to be defeated, yet he rises again to new life. So we find the whole teaching of God's kingdom right there.

### **1. The Lord Jesus, the first seed, brings forth the church**

What happens when a seed rises again to new life? A whole new batch of seeds will come from that single seed. This is the whole teaching of the Lord Jesus in John 12:24: "Truly, truly, I say to

you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (ESV)

The seed brings forth a whole new batch of seeds through dying and rising again. Likewise, through his death and rising again, the Lord Jesus brings forth the church, the true Christians. One seed goes into the ground, and produces a whole new batch of seeds of whatever is sown. That new batch in turn is sown, and produces yet another batch of harvest. On and on it goes.

Just as the life in the new batch of seeds is derived from the initial seed that died, so we derive our new life from the Lord Jesus who died in order to pass on this new life to us. The life in the new seed can be passed on yet again. An ear of wheat is simply a new batch of seeds. When you eat wheat, you are simply eating seed. Instead of eating it, you can sow it into the ground, and it will produce yet another batch of seeds. You can then choose to eat the seeds or sow them. A farmer would keep a portion for eating, and a portion for sowing.

## **2. Each Christian becomes a seed: he dies and rises again**

Every grain of wheat is itself a seed. It illustrates that we derive our new life from the resurrection life of Christ. We live because he died and rose again. But if we stop here, it would be a grave mistake. What will happen to this new batch of seeds? Does it get life from that first seed just so that it can remain in the ear of wheat, enjoy itself, and twiddle its thumbs? No! The

new wheat is sown again, in order to die and produce yet more fruit.

In teaching the gospel, many stop at the first part. It is true that we get new life through Christ's death and resurrection, but we as a grain of seed must in turn die and rise again. Many don't understand that second part. In Jesus' parable of the seed that dies in John 12:24–25, verse 24 refers to the Lord Jesus, and verse 25 refers to Christians who are likewise to die and rise again:

<sup>24</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. <sup>25</sup> Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. (John 12:24–25, ESV)

The picture of a seed that dies comes out in three of Jesus' parables of the seed, including the Parable of the Mustard Seed which we are studying now:

He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." (Matthew 13:31–32, ESV)

Who is the mustard seed that is sown into the ground to die and rise again? The mustard seed represents Christ, doesn't it? The kingdom of God is personified in him. It is the Lord Jesus

who dies; then through his rising again, the kingdom of God becomes a reality in the world. The parable is not merely describing a situation within the kingdom of God, but is describing the growth of the kingdom itself.

In the parable we studied last time, the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel, the symbolism is different, for the seed there represents Christians: “The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom” (Mt. 13:38). When the Lord Jesus gives us new life, he sends us out into the world (= field) where we in our turn become seeds. We die and rise again, bearing fruit to God.

That is precisely what Jesus says in John 12:25. After speaking of himself as the seed that dies (v.24), Jesus says in the next verse (v.25) that if any man tries to save his own life, he will lose it. But he who loses his life for the Lord’s sake will keep it for life eternal.

Many Christians don’t understand this, but you can understand it easily if you understand Jesus’ teaching about the seed. Unless you in turn become a seed—unless you go out into the world and live for God (even die for God, if necessary)—you will not have God’s life. If you try to save your life by not dying, you will lose it. If you put a grain of wheat somewhere where there is no soil, like a book case, nothing will happen, and it will eventually mildew and die. But if you take this grain of wheat before it gets mildewed or eaten by a bird, and drop it into the ground, it will bring forth life. That is so wonderful!

If we go back to what we previously studied, all the way back to the Parable of the Sower, the seed is the Word of God. In

each of the three parables about seed, the seed represents something different. In the Parable of the Sower, the seed is the Word of God. In the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel, the seeds are the sons of God. And now in the Parable of the Mustard Seed, the seed is Christ himself.

Combined together, they provide an overall picture: The Word of God is sown into my heart, and I respond totally and become a son of God, in turn to be sown into the world after getting the new life through Christ's death and resurrection. There are so many facets and riches in God's truth, yet all are summed up in this picture of the seed.

## **The true Christian has the life of Christ**

Let us continue to reflect on the seed, which in the Parable of the Mustard Seed is the Lord Jesus. The seed dies and brings forth a new crop of mustard seed. The new crop derives its life from the death and the resurrection of the first seed, namely, Christ. It is important to notice that a true Christian has the life of Christ in him. It's not just having a form of godliness, not just having good religious behavior, not just being nice and smiling at everybody, not just saying the right things, not just knowing how to pray the Lord's Prayer or any prayer. It is not just doing these things externally, but having the life of Christ in you. Do you have the life of Christ in you? What is it? The life of Christ is the new resurrection life that God's Holy Spirit creates in you. That is why a true Christian is new creation. It means to be a true Christian and not a darnel.

What will happen when you have the life of Christ in you? The new seed would look like the original seed, wouldn't it? That is the beauty of it! The true Christian becomes like Christ who reflects the glory of God (2 Cor. 4:6), for the Holy Spirit has transformed him. If you are a true Christian, you will find yourself becoming more and more like Jesus in the way you think, for you will learn to think as he thinks. He lived only for others, so we must learn to live for others and not for ourselves. We become like him in our love, for God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). Our conduct will become more and more like Christ's, for we are being changed from glory to glory into Christlikeness by God's power (2 Cor. 3:18). The true Christian has a certain beauty of Christ.

Are you a true Christian? If so, the likeness of Christ will manifest in your life as you become more and more like him. Once you understand this point, you will understand why the Lord Jesus speaks of sowing the sons of God into the world (Mt. 13:24). We are Christ's representatives in the world. We are his body in the world. How is the world going to know God unless it sees in us Christ's life which reflects God's glory? A seed bears resemblance to the original seed. Do you bear resemblance to Christ? Do I bear resemblance to Christ? Is Christ's life working in me powerfully? Is my thinking being transformed so that my selfishness is being put away, as I become more and more like him? Only then will I know whether I am true wheat.

Whichever picture you use, it comes to the same thing. This is the glorious thing about God's Word. As I said at the beginning, the entire salvation teaching, the entire gospel truth, is summed up in the seed.

I would like you to ask yourself: Am I truly a seed that has been born from the death and resurrection of the first seed, Jesus Christ? Is his resurrection life in me? I have many faults and shortcomings, but am I in the process of being changed "from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18)? Your degree of glory and my degree of glory in showing forth the likeness of Christ may be very limited at this stage, but at least we are progressing as the Holy Spirit conforms us to the likeness of Christ that reflects the glorious image of God. This is a powerful message that the Lord Jesus gives us in these parables. It is a message of life and transformation. May God grant us to know this truth in our own experience!

## **The kingdom of heaven will shake the world**

If you look at this parable carefully and understand it spiritually, the Lord Jesus gives us a picture of the kingdom. When the seed is sown, it is sown into the world as a tiny seed. What would you expect from a tiny seed? A tiny plant? But what you get instead is a huge plant that grows into a tree!

Technically, the mustard plant is not a tree but a vegetable. Yet it grows to the size of a tree with considerable speed. It is a picture of the life power inside a tiny seed that produces so huge a plant. From this you get a picture of the kingdom.

As I said, when you see the mixing of the good and the bad in the kingdom of God as in the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel, you may get discouraged and wonder if there is still a future for the kingdom of God. But the Lord gives us the Parable of the Mustard Seed to tell us that God's power is in the seed. Even if the seed is tiny, something great will emerge from the tiny work. How great will it be? So great that even the birds of the air will make their nests and dwell on the branches of this mustard plant.

By purposefully using the language of the Old Testament, Jesus directs our attention at once to the Old Testament. If you turn to Ezekiel 31:3–14 or Daniel 4:10–17, you will notice that the kingdoms of the world are described as great trees in which the birds of the air nest, and under which the animals of the field find shade. But the reference of particular interest to us is Ezekiel 17:22–24, for it refers to the Messianic kingdom, the kingdom of Christ:

<sup>22</sup> The Lord Yahweh says this: “From the top of the tall cedar tree, from the highest branch I shall take a shoot and plant it myself on a high and lofty mountain. <sup>23</sup> I shall plant it on the highest mountain in Israel. It will put out branches and bear fruit and grow into a noble cedar tree. Every kind of bird will live beneath it, every kind of winged creature will rest in the shade of its branches. <sup>24</sup> And all the trees of the countryside will know that I, Yahweh, am the one who lays the tall tree low and **raises the low tree high**, who makes the green tree wither and makes the withered bear fruit. I, Yahweh, have spoken, and I will do it.” (Ezekiel 17:22–24, New Jerusalem Bible)

Jesus refers to these prophetic words, in particular the statement that God “raises the low tree high” (see boldface) to draw a contrast between the mustard tree, the lowest of all the trees you could think of, and the cedar, a tall and powerful tree (v.22). The red cedar, for example, has such durability that it becomes exceedingly fine wood; it has high water resistance and does not decay easily.

God takes the lowly things of this world and exalts them. He uses the foolish things to confound the wise (1 Cor. 1:27). This has always been His principle. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he did not ride on a great Arabian charger, as many preachers have noted, but came sitting on a donkey, a humble form of transportation. The Lord Jesus deliberately points to this passage in Ezekiel, with some adjustments, to indicate the nature of the kingdom at the present time.

## **What do the birds and beasts represent?**

What do the birds which make their nests in the branches represent? Ezekiel 31:6 tells us that the birds and the beasts represent all the great nations of the world:

All the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs;  
under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth to  
their young, and under its shadow lived all great nations.  
(Ezekiel 31:6, ESV)

So the Parable of the Mustard seed doesn't leave us to guesswork. The clues are all there provided you know the Word of

God. The picture is that of the kingdom of God, with tiny and insignificant beginnings, which becomes a great power in the world, so much so that the nations come to dwell under its shade.

When the disciples heard this, they could only take it by faith. They could not see its fulfillment for there wasn't yet a great nation living under the shade of the kingdom of God. The kingdom was a mustard seed at that stage. It was insignificant, and nobody took much notice of it. It did shake the people in Palestine for a time, but the world at large hadn't taken notice of the kingdom of God.

But we live in an age in which we are eyewitnesses of the fulfillment of Jesus' teaching. He says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mt. 24:35). The disciples had to take his words by faith, for how could they know that what he said was true, that one day the great nations of the world will shelter under the branches of the kingdom of God? But what he said came true. Many mighty nations of the world today take shelter in the branches of this tree. These declare themselves to be Christian nations in some sense or other. The picture of birds is quite interesting, for the bald eagle is an emblem of the United States. The double eagle constantly appears in German emblems in one form or another, either the double or single eagle. It is curious that many nations represent themselves by birds. These are the nations that have made their dwelling in the shade of this tree, though it does not necessarily mean that they are Christian in reality.

The mustard plant is the kingdom of God, and its branches represent Christians. “Branches” is a common term for Christians in the Bible. We are the branches, whether in the picture of the vine in John 15:2–5, or of the olive tree in Romans 11:17–24. In any case, whichever the tree, Christ is the main stem or root, being the foundation of the tree, and the branches are the Christians.

These birds are not part of the tree—not part of the kingdom of God—but they do make their nests in the branches. They try to gain advantages and benefits from the kingdom of God. This is another way of saying that the influence of the kingdom of God has become so powerful. The teachings of Christ have become pervasive throughout the world, such that nations find shelter in its shade even if they don’t practice his teachings. This is a prophetic parable; the Lord Jesus is foretelling what is going to happen.

## **God establishes Christ as the King of kings**

This is not all there is to the prophecy because its fulfillment continues right up to the time when the kingdom of God will rule in the world and every nation will be subject to God and Christ. This is already prophesied, for example, in Daniel 2:35, in the picture of the great stone: “But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.”

In the New Testament, we see the same thing in Revelation 11:15, where at the blowing of the trumpet by the seventh angel, loud voices in heaven declare, “The kingdom of this world has

become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” When Christ comes again, the whole world will submit to his authority because God will establish him as the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

You have to take this by faith, don’t you? You haven’t seen it fulfilled completely, have you? But remember that what he said has been fulfilled. Many of the mightiest nations of the world declare themselves to be Christian. It is a foolish person who doesn’t see that these words concerning what is yet to come will also be fulfilled. The apostle Paul says in Philippians 2:10–11 that when Jesus comes again, “every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Christ and his faithful ones will judge all nations with a rod of iron (Rev. 2:27; 12:5). Paul says, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:10). God sent Jesus as Savior the first time; the second time Jesus will come as Judge.

The prophecy in this short parable is clear to anyone who understands the Old Testament, and the beauty of the parable is that a great part of it has already been fulfilled. We live in the privileged position of seeing it fulfilled before our eyes. The Christians in the 4th century saw it fulfilled when the great Roman Empire laid down its sword before the church. This empire under Constantine, the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire, declared its surrender to God and to Christ, putting the nation under the shade of the mustard tree. Since then we have seen nation after nation come to dwell in the shade of that tree. Germany and the United States did not exist

in those days, but now they are Christian countries. This is remarkable!

Is there anything impressive about a mustard tree? Nothing much! There are mightier trees in the world, yet the mustard tree is the one that conquers. Such is God's remarkable power. Anyone who has eyes to see, even if he is not a Christian, will be able to see the remarkable march of God's kingdom, the remarkable growth of this mustard seed that conquers without drawing a sword (at least in the early days before later episodes of political conquest), and whose shade is shelter for the mighty nations.

Insofar as what the Lord Jesus said has come true to this day, I would like to impress upon your mind that his words never fail. Although some nations today have not submitted to the kingship of God and His Christ, the day will yet come when every nation will bow to His sovereignty. Those of us who have walked with God would know that the day will come, just as what the Lord Jesus has said so far has come to pass.

As I said, the disciples had nothing to see for its fulfillment, and could only listen with sheer faith. And who was Jesus at that time? Just a carpenter wandering about in Palestine saying these grand words. Some will say, "Who is he? Is the whole world going to be subject to his kingdom by a God-given authority? Surely his head has become too big for him! Look at the small band of twelve disciples following him around, whereas none of the religious or political leaders accepts him. And this poor man ends up dying on the cross. Did he really say that the great nations of the world are going to shelter in

the shade of God's tree like birds? He's had one drink too many!"

Do we have faith in his words? Can his words ever possibly come true? Lo and behold, Jesus' words have never failed. He was the one who said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mt. 24:35). Who would be bold enough to say these things in advance with the confidence that he will not be proven wrong? Let anyone try to prove him wrong. "If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?" (John 8:46). That is the kind of statement the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, dared to say to any person.

History has justified his words again and again. He says to his disciples that his kingdom will advance, and that without the sword (cf. John 18:36). Ideologies and religions have tried to conquer with the sword. Whole nations have been subjugated by the gun for fear that they will revolt. Jesus doesn't do anything like that. He conquered without the sword as Napoleon realized when he said, "I conquered a great part of this world with armies, but Jesus never drew a sword."

His kingdom has continued for two thousand years to this day, and 1800 years to the time of Napoleon. Jesus' words and their fulfillment are truly wonderful! The Lord is encouraging us, especially after we nearly got discouraged from the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel, and we thought to ourselves, "If there is so much corruption inside the kingdom of God, what is the future for the kingdom?" But the Lord says that God's purposes will not be defeated, but will be fulfilled upon the earth.

## **The truth is always with the minority**

I would like you to bear in mind that although the beginnings of God's work are always small, never despise the days of small things, for God will do mighty things. Every great work begins small. Even the non-Christian British philosopher, Thomas Carlyle, could see that. He once said, "Every great movement in this world began with a minority of one." The wise and worldly man understands that every great movement begins with a minority of one, as we see from history. One man, Alexander the Great, stood up and conquered the world. One man, Caesar Augustus, stood up and conquered the world. One man, Confucius, conquered China with Confucianism, a moral teaching approaching a philosophy, though not quite a religion. The Chinese nation lived by the teachings of Confucius for centuries, and in many ways to its great benefit.

It is also like this in the history of the church. Time and again, one lone man stands up to speak to the whole world. He is condemned, persecuted, and despised, but he is victorious because God's power is at work. One unknown man, Martin Luther, stood up to the might of the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor, and spoke the Word of God. How can one man be right and the whole Catholic Church be wrong? But he stood up and spoke forth the truth, proclaiming the Word of God. Today the Catholic Church has come to realize that Luther was right in many respects. Hence since Vatican II, there has been an attempt at reconciliation. They would not do this unless they realize that he was right in great measure.

In the 18th century, John Wesley stood up to the corruption of the Anglican Church in his day, and preached holiness. Again one man against the world. He was not allowed to preach in the churches even though he was an ordained minister of the Church of England. He was not even allowed to preach in the church where his father had been a minister. He was not allowed to preach anywhere, for the Church of England virtually condemned him to silence. So he stood in the field or on the streets and preached, for he will not be silenced. He was often criticized: “Mr. Wesley, who do you think you are? Are you are the only man who is right, and the whole Church of England is wrong? You are arrogant beyond belief.” Everybody condemned him, but he kept on preaching because God’s message of salvation and holiness was burning in his heart. Since then, Methodism, the movement associated with Wesley, has spread throughout the world. The Church of England today seeks unity with the Methodist Church because they admit that the Methodists were right to a great extent.

Time and again, in the history of the world, one mustard seed, one tiny work of God, builds up to a great thing. Of course the early days are always lonely, accompanied by much persecution, criticism, and accusations, which Wesley, Luther, and other men of God constantly faced. But from that tiny mustard seed grows a mighty work of God.

So never be afraid to be in the minority. Men of God speak because the fire burns in their hearts. When Luther was told to recant what he taught on pain of excommunication, he said, “I cannot deny my conscience before God. I must speak what God

has laid on my heart. You can excommunicate me or exterminate me, but here I stand, I can do no other.” We are grateful that he stood, aren’t we?

These are the ones who pay the price. They fall into the ground and die, so that a plant may come forth to glorify God.

The Lord Jesus was alone. The leaders of the nation were arrayed against him, such as the scribes, who are Bible scholars (they are also called lawyers because they are learned scholars of the Old Testament Law). They said to Jesus, “How can you be right when the theologians are against you?” I think that little band of people that followed him had incredible courage, by the grace of God.

But look what has come to pass: Jesus died and rose again! The mustard plant has come forth, and the nations shelter in its branches. In Canada, the United States, Germany, and most Western countries, what do they produce in a court of law? The Holy Bible! You swear by the Word of God! They all shelter under that mustard tree. Not only that, Jesus will also rule when he returns. Praise God for that! But you have to take that by faith. I think if you have common sense, you can see that just as the prophecy of the first coming of Jesus was fulfilled, so the prophecy of his second coming will be fulfilled. Let the scoffers scoff, but on that day they will kneel like everybody else, and confess Jesus as Lord.

What we see in the Lord Jesus’ amazing parable is that the kingdom of God will spread throughout the world!



## Chapter 11



# THE PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN

Matthew 13:33

Montreal, August 27, 1978

Today we look at the Parable of the Leaven in Matthew 13:33:

He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.” (Matthew 13:33, ESV)

### **The church will be corrupted by the world**

**I**n the previous parable, the Parable of the Mustard Seed, the Lord Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God will spread throughout the world. But notice the perfect balance of his teaching. Just in case his disciples get too euphoric over the fact that the sun will never set on the kingdom of God, and that they

will reign with him, he brings in a counterbalance with the Parable of the Leaven. Whereas the Parable of the Mustard Seed says that the kingdom will spread throughout the world in this age, the Parable of the Leaven says that as the kingdom extends into the world, the world will also extend into the church.

The Lord Jesus foresaw all this. How true it is that the church is being corrupted by the ideas of the world, by the ways of the world. The result is a situation of interpenetration between them, a mixing of the world and the church, of which Jesus warns us most seriously.

Here we have yet another parable presented in only one verse, and it is amazing how the Lord Jesus can say everything in that one verse, whereas most of us take a long time just to say one thing! The challenge for us is that in order to bring out all the riches in that one verse, we have to say a great deal, otherwise we would read it and see nothing. What do you see in this verse? What is it saying exactly? We can imagine the Lord Jesus saying to his disciples:

Jesus: "Do you see the woman in the backyard?"

The disciples: "Yes, we see her."

"Do you see that she is kneading flour?"

"Yes, we see that."

"What is she making? Several loaves of bread and some cakes?"

"Yes, we see that."

“Do you see what she is doing? She takes a small lump of leaven—which is yeast—and puts it into the flour. She kneads the flour so that the leaven mixes into the flour and leavens the whole lump.”

Today you have self-rising flour which has leaven inside the flour, but in ancient days, they didn't have self-rising flour. Many would use leaven (yeast) to get good baking results. They would mix the leaven into the flour until the whole lump of dough is leavened. Those of us who make bread would know what that would do. When you mix in leaven and put the dough in a warm place, not too hot and not too cold, the dough will rise. It is getting filled with air, getting puffed up, and then it becomes nice and fluffy, very crumbly and soft. You now have a nice leavened loaf of bread.

## **Leaven represents the world**

What is the important spiritual teaching of this parable that the Lord Jesus is showing his disciples? There are only two ways to expound leaven in this parable.

One way is to say that the leaven is God's work, and the bread is the world. In this picture, the church is the leaven that works inside the bread, and spreads its influence throughout the world. This is simply another picture of the Parable of the Mustard seed, so it is not telling us anything we have not already learned from the previous parable. If this is what today's parable means, then the message is not even as clear as

in the previous parable, because it doesn't actually tell us in what ways the church spreads through the world.

The whole picture becomes too imprecise, and we are left with no real definitions. What exactly do we mean by "the influence of the church"? What is "influence"? Spiritual influence? Moral influence? A literal physical influence by which the church somehow spreads throughout the world and gains control? Or a mixture of all these? But if the message of the parable is a mixture of all these, it may not be necessarily correct. For example, in the present age, the spiritual influence of the church is not yet all-pervasive in the world. So we have problems right there.

The other understanding of the Parable of the Leaven is that *the world is spreading into the church*. I have already hinted that this is the correct exposition of the matter. Now I have to give you the reasons for this understanding, for I cannot expect you to simply take my word for it. Even if you are willing to take my word for it, I wouldn't want you to, because I don't want you to accept the Word of God according to my understanding simply because I say it is so, but that you may know the evidence for this conclusion.

I have to tell you right from the start that virtually all modern commentators take the first alternative, namely, that this parable is a repetition of the previous one, in which *the church is said to be spreading throughout the world*.

The reasons given in support of this view are unconvincing. There are only two I have been able to find in the commentators. The first reason is simply that this parable follows

very well from the previous parable, as if this is some kind of evidence. On the contrary, a parable that immediately follows another parable often presents another side to Jesus' teaching. In the Lord's teaching, no parable simply repeats the message of the previous parable.

The second reason given by the commentators is that this parable is a *comforting promise*, as Fritz Rienecker, the German commentator and scholar, says in his German commentary *Lukas*. But saying, "I take this view because it is comforting," is not proper grounds for exegesis. Exegesis or the exposition of the Bible is not meant to please people. The alternative view—that the world's influence is pressing into the church—may be uncomfortable to contemplate, but we don't do exegesis by whether it is comfortable or not. What kind of reason is this? Rienecker speaks of this as a comforting promise of the development of the kingdom. But this comforting promise has already been given in the previous parable of the mustard seed. Does he need two parables to express the same thing? Is one not enough for him? But apart from that, not a single exegetical reason is given.

The Bible expounds itself; it is self-explanatory. We don't have to invent an interpretation for it. You must check how the Bible intends itself to be understood. The commentators have failed to produce any reasons whatsoever for their view of this parable. This is very puzzling to me.

These two views—that the church penetrates the world versus the world penetrates the church—were both held throughout the history of the church. But beginning around the

19th century, only one view began to predominate, thanks to German scholars, who always seem to dominate the field of theology. When a German scholar or a group of German theologians teach something, it is quite remarkable to see how the British and American theologians follow the Germans. I have never been able to figure out the reason. Almost every major idea in theology was propounded by a German theologian, and it would often be the case that the British, the French and the Americans would follow the Germans. This is good when the Germans are right, but what if they are wrong? The Germans are not infallible.

When I open the commentaries, to my astonishment almost every modern commentator follows the lead of these early German theologians in advocating the first alternative, namely, that in the Parable of the Leaven, the church is spreading through the world. This picture has already been given in the previous parable (of the mustard seed), in which case nothing new is being told us in the present parable. But that is not my objection. My true objection is that exegetically, this alternative cannot be sustained on the basis of Scripture. I am going to leave those who love the Word of God to be the judge of this, when I present the overwhelming evidence for the other view.

When I examine the matter, my heart is filled with a sense of sadness. Today if a pastor in a Chinese church cannot read English adequately, he has to depend on a Chinese translation of an English work. To exegete the Word of God, these pastors would often turn to the commentators whom they regard as experts. But little do they know that the commentators follow

each other like a flock of sheep. When I look at the situation, I am filled with a sense of grief. Why has blindness struck the church? Could this parable be proving the very point that the world has penetrated the church? They don't seem to catch the message of this parable despite the overwhelming clarity of the Biblical expository evidence in this parable.

I ask you to concentrate on the evidence for a few minutes. I only have to present a portion of the overwhelming evidence, and you will see the richness of the meaning that comes out. This parable doesn't just repeat the previous parable in a different way. That would be adding nothing of substance to the previous parable. In fact, what it is saying is that the world is penetrating the church with its influences, and the Lord Jesus is cautioning his disciples to watch out for this. We now live in a day when we can see how true it is that the church has been penetrated by the world.

## **The parable portrays the kingdom of heaven**

The parable begins with the words, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven..." So you say, "Aha, there you go! So you see, the kingdom of heaven *is* the leaven that penetrates the world!"

That is exactly where many commentators have gone wrong, violating the basic principles of expounding the parables. In saying this, I assure you that I am not trying to be arrogant, but to tell you the truth of the matter, that this is simply not how a parable is expounded.

The great German New Testament scholar Jeremias understood this very well. He points this out in his standard work on the parables, a work that every scholar and commentator of the parables reads and depends on. In fact, many of the commentaries in the Pelican series are simply rehashing what Jeremias wrote in his standard work on the parables. Jeremias says that you don't just take the opening words, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven," and stop there. You have to take the entire statement. The correct meaning is, "The case with the kingdom of heaven is like the case with leaven which a woman took." It doesn't merely say that the kingdom of God is leaven, because the whole statement continues right up to the end without a break.

If you say, "I don't quite follow you," let me explain it a little more clearly. In the Parable of the Sower and also the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel, the Lord Jesus says something like, "The kingdom of God is like a sower who went forth to sow," and so on. Does it mean that the kingdom of God is the sower? No, because Jesus already tells us that the sower is Jesus himself, not the kingdom. Or is the kingdom of God identical to wheat in the other parable? No, the wheat is what is harvested at the end. Or is the kingdom of God the seed? No, the seed represents the Word of God. Or is the kingdom of God the field? No, the field is the world.

This is the kind of error, even absurdity, you get when you quote the words "the kingdom of heaven is like leaven," and stop there.

You might ask, “What then is the kingdom?” To ask the question is to miss the point. None of these represents the kingdom. On the contrary, it is the whole parable in its entirety, not just one part of it, that presents the situation of the kingdom. Is it valid for us to ask, “Does my arm represent my body?” No. “Does my ear represent my body?” No. The body is all these things put together, not just the arm or the ear individually. So when you look at the kingdom of God, you don’t read, “The kingdom of God is like a sower,” to mean that the kingdom is a sower. In fact the sower is the Lord Jesus himself.

If you don’t understand this basic point about parables, you will make a complete mess of trying to understand them. One moment the kingdom of God is the Son of God, the next moment it is the leaven, the next moment it is the merchant. Then if you look at Matthew 25:1, “The kingdom of God is like ten virgins,” now the kingdom is ten virgins! How then are you going to understand the kingdom of God? You will say, “Well, I give up!”

You got into this confusion, even error, in the first place because you didn’t understand a basic principle in expounding the kingdom of God. You should not assume that the first word “leaven” is the answer to the question of what the kingdom is. You take the *whole* statement, “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.” The whole picture is involved, not just the first word “leaven”. It is astonishing that many commentators don’t know this elementary principle.

You could even change the order of the words, and they would still mean the same: “The kingdom of God is like a woman who took leaven and put it in the meal,” or “The kingdom of God is like meal into which a woman mixed some leaven ...” Do you see the point? This is a fundamental point that every exegete must understand. It is astonishing how few do. As I said, Jeremias saw it very well. He knows that it does not mean that the kingdom is equal to leaven, but that the kingdom is explained by the whole statement: the case with the kingdom of God is like the case with the leaven that a woman took and put into the meal. All this is clear to Jeremias.

So this is the first point I would like you to notice. I have to clear the ground so that you will understand the exposition.

## **In the Bible, leaven is always something sinful**

The next question is, What does leaven mean in the Bible? What counts is not what I say, but what the Bible says.

This is easy, for the Bible has a lot to say about leaven, as you would know the minute you take out a concordance. I hope that many of you who study the Bible would know what a concordance is. You don’t have to take my word for it, but just open a concordance and look up “leaven”. You will immediately see that in the Bible, leaven always refers to something bad. This fact is stated in every Bible dictionary.

But what do the commentators do? The German expositor whom we mentioned, Fritz Rienecker, who is usually a very fine

expositor, is aware that in the Bible *outside this parable*, leaven always refers to something evil or negative. But then he says that *an exception is made for this parable!* My question is, Can you kindly tell me what makes it an exception? You would have to produce strong evidence to make this an exception to the strong rule. But he does not produce a single reason for it. Nothing! It is because he has let his own idea determine his exegesis.

When you study the Bible, you must come with no preconceived idea. If you come with a preconceived idea, you will decide in advance what the passage means, and will make it mean what you want it to mean. This expositor wants to say that the leaven is the church that spreads through the world, so he says it is an exception. And why is it an exception? No reason is given.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for “leaven” is used only in this parable and two other references. I trust that most commentators who write books do understand a bit of Greek, yet it appears that they have not noticed this matter.

Let’s look at 1 Corinthians 5:6–7, one of the two references outside this parable where this Greek word for “leaven” is used. Paul says to the Corinthians:

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. (1 Corinthians 5:6–7, ESV)

Do you see the picture? Paul is saying, “You Christians are bread that ought not to be leavened. So cleanse out the old leaven of sin in your life.” If you look at the preceding verses 1–5, you will see that the context is about a very serious sin in the Corinthian church, where a man commits incest by having a sexual relationship with his stepmother. What a dreadful situation! Paul says angrily to the Corinthian church, “Such a thing is disgusting even to non-Christians and heathens! Yet you tolerate a sin like this in the church. I excommunicate this man! Sling him out of the church! Remove the leaven from the church! Remove this sinful influence so that it won’t pollute the whole church.” Those are strong words, but Paul is not afraid to deal harshly with sin.

But today everything is hush-hush. “Let’s not rock the boat. It doesn’t really matter. Let us play soft with sin.” Paul has no time to play soft with sin. He says, “Remove the leaven!” That is the context to his statement about leaven. He says the same thing in Galatians 5:9, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump,” referring to the false teaching of bringing back circumcision into the church.

Leaven in the Bible always refers, without fail, to something sinful. In the Old Testament Law, a sacrifice, say, at the Passover, could not be presented with leaven in it. Bread which is presented to God must be unleavened. For the Passover feast, leaven has to be ceremonially removed from every Jewish home, as it is still being done today. They must eat unleavened bread. Leaven was a sign of sinfulness. Is it not plain to us that leaven refers to something evil?

## Bread refers to believers

Let us ask the next question: What does the bread refer to? If you look at the Bible's teaching on "bread," you will notice that bread always refers to believers, without exception. If we had followed the earlier parables at all, we would have observed this point.

What is bread made of? Wheat! The Greek word translated "meal" or "flour" here refers to wheat flour. The word specifically refers to wheat flour, which doesn't come out in the English translations. In the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel, the Lord Jesus has already given us the clue that wheat refers to believers. When we speak of wheat flour, we are talking about believers.

As we go through the Bible, we find that wheat, flour, and bread consistently refer to Christians. In John 6:35, the bread is Christ himself: "I am the bread of life." We, by extension, being the body of Christ, are called "bread"—or "one bread" as the church, the body of Christ, is called in 1 Corinthians 10:17, for Christ is the bread of life.

If that is not clear enough yet, Jesus says to Peter, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat" (Luke 22:31) or wheat flour, if you like.

In every instance, wheat represents a believer. Never in the Bible does wheat refer to non-Christians. The evidence is overwhelming.

## Leaven puffs up the bread

The next thing we observe is what leaven does. When leaven becomes warm, it emits a certain gas and puffs up the bread. If it were the case that the leaven represents the church that spreads in the world, it would be saying that the church contributes nothing to the world beyond puffing it up. What kind of an idea is this? To anyone who studies the matter, “puff up” in the Bible always refers to arrogance, an evil influence. In 1 Corinthians 5:2, Paul says, “you are puffed up” (NKJV), as if hinting at the connection between leaven and being puffed up (to be arrogant). Then in verse 7 Paul says, “Cleanse out the old leaven” which has puffed up the Corinthian church. How plain can you get? Isn’t it clear that leaven refers to the undesirable influences of the world upon the church, and that leaven puffs up the church by filling it with pride and arrogance?

I am sorry to say, but many times when I look at the church today, such the Catholic Church with all the parading in ceremonial gowns, gold crosses studded with jewels, and rings of precious stones, this looks like a picture of being puffed up. The church leaders have become the princes of the world. Jesus says, “You are not to be like the nations of this world in which the mighty ones lord it over the others. But the greatest among you shall be the servant of all” (cf. Mt. 20:25–27).

The world has saturated the church with its system, structure, and behavior, such that the church behaves like the world. The leaven—the arrogance and evil influence of the world—has puffed up the church. This is the Biblical teaching of this parable.

## The kingdom of heaven is not hidden

### Jesus and the apostles preached openly

Let us look at the word “hid” used of the woman who hid the leaven in three measures of flour. Hiding indicates either of two things: an act of secrecy, or covering up something.

Yet these are the very last things that God would do. In what sense would God ever hide His kingdom in the world? The kingdom of God comes into the world without any hiding, but is made known for the world to see.

The things Jesus did were open to everyone to see. All of Palestine could see what he was doing. He did nothing in secret. When they came to arrest Jesus secretly at night, he said, “Every day I sat in the temple or stood in a field to teach and preach openly to the public, yet you never seized me. So why do you arrest me secretly in the dark?” (cf. Mt. 26:55; Lk. 22:53) Do we have eyes to see that the world acts in secret, but Jesus does not? He does nothing secret or underhanded in some hidden corner.

Similarly, the apostle Paul says, “We have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men” (1 Cor. 4:9). You wouldn’t hide a spectacle, for a spectacle is meant for the whole world to see. There is nothing hidden about a spectacle. In Acts 17:6, the Christians were accused of “turning the world upside down.” If the world is aware that it is being turned upside down, how

exactly do you hide that? That is why they tried to kill Paul and persecute the Christians. Again, Paul says in Acts 26:26, “The king [Agrippa] knows about these things, and I speak boldly to him. I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner.”

These things are not hidden from human view. So to talk about hiding the kingdom of God is to miss the point entirely because it is not hidden at all.

The gospel is the “gospel of the kingdom” (Mt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14). The gospel that Paul preaches is not hidden, but if it is hidden, it is hidden to those who are perishing (2 Cor. 4:3). Why are they perishing? Is it that God wants them to perish? Not at all! Paul says in verse 4 that it is because the god of this world has blinded their eyes so that they cannot see the glory of Christ who is the image of God. God does not hide the gospel. If it is hidden, it is Satan who does the hiding, to blind the eyes of those who do not see the glory of Christ.

## **The church does not act in a hidden way**

Jesus says in Matthew 5:14, “A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” Is the Scriptural evidence not plain enough? It is not that the church is hiding in the world, but that the world enters into the church through its secret pervasive influence.

We see this in Jude 4: “Certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God.” It is the world and false teachers who work in the church in a secret and

hidden way. The world works secretly, but the church works openly in the world and does not hide itself.

Hence a wrong understanding of “hid” in the Parable of the Leaven misses an important point about the kingdom of God. The influence of the church never works in a hidden way, but works by *crisis after crisis*. What do we mean by this? Turning the world upside down produces a crisis. When you hear the gospel, it grips your heart, and you begin to feel a crisis inside you. “Will I turn away from sin? Will I become a Christian or remain an unbeliever? Do I dare become a Christian? If I become a Christian, what will my family say to me?” It is a crisis, and there is nothing hidden about it. In the history of the church, the kingdom of God develops from crisis to crisis. You immediately face a crisis when the gospel confronts you, and the crisis is something obvious to anyone who observes you grappling with it.

As with the individual, so it is with the church. If the church is hidden, it would not be persecuted. But it is persecuted! The church may try to hide for a while, but it is very hard for the church ever to hide. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. The Romans could locate the Christians easily. Just command the people to offer incense to Caesar, and those who refuse will be picked out immediately.

You cannot hide as a Christian. How is that even possible? The only way for you to hide is not to confess the name of Jesus. But no Christian can do that because we are chosen by God to witness for Jesus. Take the case of my friend, a surgeon, who was baptized with me. When the government told him to stop

witnessing to his patients, he said, “I can do no other. My Lord has commanded me to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth. I have to speak forth.” Paul says that he who believes in his heart and confesses with his mouth shall be saved (Romans 10:10). This makes it impossible for you to hide.

The church is the city set on a hill. It shines out for everyone to see. To speak of the church hiding in the world is to fail to understand the very nature of the church as it is taught in the New Testament. It may be the case that the church is hiding in the world today, but we are talking about the New Testament church that did not hide. Oh no, it stood forth glorious and fearless, as Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid of those who kill the body” (Mt. 10: 28)—words meant for those who are not afraid to proclaim, and to stand up for, the truth.

## **The world erodes the church stealthily**

How then does the world penetrate the church? We have seen that it is not the church hiding in the world, but the world hiding in the church, working from the inside to puff up the church and ruin it. That is what Jesus warns his disciples of: “Beware! Watch yourselves so that your heart may not be weighed with dissipation and drunkenness and the cares of this life” (Luke 21:34).

Nobody preaches on this anymore, as though people no longer fall into temptation; but even if they fall into temptation, it supposedly doesn’t matter much. But the Lord Jesus warns

us not to fall into temptation, but to watch out for the leaven of the world that will enter into our lives stealthily.

Persecution is usually not what causes Christians to fall. I have seen Christians withstand persecution unflinchingly when they are thrown out of their homes, or dispossessed of an inheritance. This is not an exaggeration. I had a friend who was an heir to a rubber plantation in Malaysia. He was a fellow student of mine in London. He came to the Lord, and was dispossessed of his inheritance because of his faith. His father gave him a choice: “You either don’t become a Christian, and you will receive an inheritance; or you become a Christian, and you won’t inherit my fortune.” He chose to be dispossessed. He was thrown out of his home, hounded and persecuted, yet he stood unflinchingly.

But do you know what broke him in the end? The secret influences of the world! This is far more dangerous, my brothers and sisters! I beg of you to understand this parable.

Jesus knows that most Christians will stand in persecution. Some might break, but most will not. I have seen people in China standing like a tree in a storm, shaken yet unflinching and unbroken. The branches are torn off, yet the tree stays rooted in God.

But do you know what the world does to undermine that? It sends a tiny bug, a little disease that enters through the bark and works into the fibers of the tree, corrupting it from the inside. Fungus grows inside and destroys the tree. What the mighty storms cannot do, that silent, insidious influence can. I beg of you, brothers and sisters, to understand this most

important teaching that we must not let anyone rob us of. This is what Jesus is telling us in this most important little parable. Beware of the leaven that will destroy you if you are not careful.

## **The leaven of the Pharisees: Hypocrisy**

What then is the leaven? The Lord Jesus explains it perfectly. He is so wonderful, for he doesn't leave us guessing what the leaven means. In Matthew 16:6, 11–12, he warns his disciples, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” He is saying, “I am confident that you will stand firm in the fearful days ahead. You have stood with me in my trials and persecutions, but I want you to be aware of that insidious influence that can destroy you from the inside. Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

What is the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees? Jesus doesn't leave us guessing either. In Luke 12:1, the leaven of the Pharisees is hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is not something that comes suddenly. On the contrary, you slowly shift away until you become a hypocrite. People do not start out intending to be hypocrites. The Pharisees were not insincere people who wanted to be hypocrites. That would be a great misunderstanding of the Pharisees. They were sincere people at the start, just as many Christians were sincere when they first committed their lives to Christ. But after a time, they started to slowly shift away.

That is why Paul says in Colossians 1:23, “not shifting away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard.” This shifting

is a slow process of being moved away, perhaps by the currents, perhaps by the wind. Whatever may be the cause of the shifting, it happens slowly and imperceptibly. Hypocrisy then sets in. It is the disease that kills many Christians. They start out as genuine Christians, but they slowly cool down. Then one day, they find that they have become hypocrites.

The church has too many hypocrites already. They did not begin with the intention of being hypocrites, yet they imperceptibly shifted away, so that eventually only the outward is left, but the inside is gone. They honor God with their lips, but their heart is far from Him. I beg of you to understand this most important point!

In this connection, let us consider how leaven works. Leaven prospers in only one kind of atmosphere. What kind? A lukewarm atmosphere! All of you who bake bread would know that. If you put leaven—yeast—in a cold place, it does nothing. If the place is too hot, the leaven will die and won't leaven anything, for you did not give it the lukewarm condition which it needs to rise. It cannot be too hot or too cold.

The church must never be leavened, but be either hot or cold. As the Lord says in Revelation 3:16, "Because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold ..." The church in Laodicea has been so leavened that they are neither hot nor cold! That is hypocrisy: neither hot nor cold. They have departed from their first love.

## The leaven of the Sadducees: Unbelief

The second kind of leaven is the leaven of the Sadducees. What is the leaven of the Sadducees? We learn from Luke 20:27 that it is unbelief. Unbelief coming into the church is a fearful thing. There are plenty of unbelieving Christians. How did this happen? Well, you begin to have doubts in your mind about God or the Bible or your faith. If you don't deal with these doubts, they will grow and slowly eat away your faith. You have questions you don't know how to answer. Gradually you will have many, many questions. Unless you know how to combat these questions, unbelief slowly takes over.

I have seen people eaten away by unbelief. They read some philosopher and get confused, and soon their faith starts shaking. They read about this idea and that idea, and are blown about by every wind of doctrine. Soon their faith is eroded by unbelief. I have seen so many theology students who went to seminary with the intention of serving God, but came out shaken! Some have been broken. That is because we are confronted with so much unbelief in the seminaries, so much unbelief in the faculty of theology. The theology students didn't survive, for they lacked the spiritual depth to draw strength from God to overcome these things.

I was trained in a liberal Faculty of Divinity, and every day I was pounded by unbelief and liberal teaching. But thanks be to God, it did not scathe me! Why? Because I knew whom I had believed. But these students did not know whom they had believed—even by their own admission. Thus the leaven of the Sadducees, unbelief, takes its toll.

## **The leaven of Herod: Self-will, opportunism**

The last kind of leaven is the leaven of Herod. The Lord Jesus leaves us in no doubt as to what this leaven is. Mark 8:15 speaks of the “leaven of Herod”. You can read about the Herods in a Bible dictionary, but I will save you the trouble, and give you the general picture. Herod is a picture of the utterly self-willed man. Because he is self-willed and worldly, he is opportunistic.

Such people bend with the wind every which way, and don’t stand up for anything. They are afraid to stand up for Christ at their college, for fear that somebody will snigger at them. They don’t want to pray when you are sitting by them or in front of them, for fear of being called a holy Joe: “I don’t mind being Joe, but not holy Joe.” People see him among the church people, and say, “Look at him, he is all religious! He has gone funny upstairs.” These opportunists are scared of this religious labeling. “What are you doing, praying?” “Oh no! My eyes are tired, so I am rubbing them a bit.” They dare not pray because they are scared of what people will think of them, that people will laugh at them, “Huh? Nobody’s a Christian these days!”

This is the leaven of Herod, an opportunist. You can read up on the history of the Herods to see how they often changed sides. This time a Herod is the friend of a certain ruler. When the next nation comes along and conquers Palestine, he becomes its friend too. He is the friend of the Romans, he is the friend of the Egyptians, he is everybody’s friend. So long as you leave him to be king of his empire, he doesn’t mind whose friend he is. If you are on the winning side, he will fight for you.

If you are on the losing side, he will push you out. He is an opportunist.

How many Christians are opportunists? They want to have the best of this world, yet also the best of God's kingdom. They want to have everything. They want to have one foot in the kingdom of God, and the other in the grave, in the hope that the foot in the kingdom will support them when the grave opens up. What kind of Christianity is this? Opportunistic! This is the dreadful thing. These Christians are self-willed. They want to do their own thing, and go their own way.

The world works in us by influencing our will and desires: "Come on, you've got to stand up. Be self-willed, and do your own thing. Why do you need to listen to what God tells you to do? That is not practical nowadays. There is no use trying to love everyone. If you love them, they will slap you in the face. That is not the way to live this life. This kind of Christianity is useless and not practical. We have got to be practical. By all means, be a Christian and go to church. But if anybody slaps you on the face, punch him twice. Give it back to him with interest. And if he is stronger than you, go and take lessons in kung fu and be ready to give it to him. That is wisdom!"

In our self-will, we want to have the best of everything. We say, "I like the Lord Jesus' teaching, but sometimes it's not very practical. So I will do my own thing. I don't mind getting baptized so long as I can do my own thing. I'll still be a Christian because Christians are nice people. So long as I can do my own will, that's fine." So the leaven of Herod comes in. Opportunists! Worldly people!

## **Beware of the subtle influence of the world**

The Lord Jesus warns us of how the world's influence will come into our lives. I warn you again: The slow and subtle influences of the world will break you where persecution cannot. We are not afraid of persecution, but what I am afraid of is the insidious influence of the world that draws your heart to it. "Just put in a little bit of self-will. Do you know how nice the world is? Look at this forbidden tree, nice to the eye, good to the taste. Have a go at it." (cf. Gen. 3:6) Or be lukewarm and let yourself be shifted. Or let doubts grow in your mind to gnaw at your faith. Or be self-willed: stand up and do your own thing. Why listen to what God tells you to do? Thus we are drawn away by the world. I beg of you to understand this.



## Chapter 12



# THE PARABLE OF THE LOST TREASURE

Matthew 13:44

Montreal, September 3, 1978

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” (Matthew 13:44, ESV)

## How is treasure hidden in a field in the first place?

**T**oday we continue our study of the Lord’s parables, by looking at the Parable of the Lost Treasure in Matthew 13:44, in which we have a complete parable in just one verse. I never cease to be amazed when I study the words of the Lord Jesus, how he can pack so much riches in a single verse.

This parable is sometimes called “The Parable of the Treasure in the Field,” but as we go along, we might come up with a more comprehensive name for the parable.

Let us imagine the picture. The Lord Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like a man who is walking through a field. Maybe he is working in the field, maybe he is just walking through. Jesus doesn’t say which, but let us for a moment assume that this man is walking through the field. As he walks, he looks around and sees something that looks like a rock or a stone, but has a smooth well-defined surface. He goes over to take a look.

And what does he find there? Not a rock or a stone, but a jar, an earthenware vessel. And he immediately knows what this could mean for him because in those days, earthenware vessels or earthen jars were used to store treasure! The treasure was usually silver or gold coins. Or sometimes jewels, diamonds and precious stones.

In those days, how do you store up valuables? You cannot visit a local bank and put your valuables in a safe deposit box stored in a vault. Instead, the valuables would be put into a jar because earthenware, which is often used to hold water, is waterproof and provides good protection for the treasure inside. The jar would then be sealed and buried in the ground.

Money is always uncertain. In this world of inflation, money tends to depreciate, so people don’t put their confidence in money. They would buy gold, jewels or diamonds as an investment since these don’t usually lose their value. They may

go up and down in value for a while, but in the long term, their value is basically stable.

What is more, these valuables are easier to carry around. If you buy a house, you can live in it, but you cannot carry it around with you. In wartime, people don't invest in property, especially in Palestine where there is constant war. The enemy comes and burns your house down, and you lose everything. If you had lived in war-torn China decades ago, you would know that a house can be worth next to nothing. Nobody wants to buy a house in wartime because it will become a liability. Even a danger. The enemy bombs the place, or fighting takes place, and your house is destroyed.

You also don't want to keep paper money. At various times in history, people would be paid with a suitcase full of money, and they would rush off to the nearest money dealer to exchange their paper money for valuables. If you don't do this fast enough, you could be left with a pile of paper that won't even buy you a loaf of bread!

People in Palestine looked for security, so they would store their valuables in an earthen vessel, and hide it in a field. Of course it is important to remember where you hid it! You have to remember that it is 20 steps east of the oak tree, then 32 steps north. If somebody cuts down the tree, you will have a problem because how are you going to find your treasure if the landmarks are gone?

There are lots of lost treasures in the world because the owners hid them but could not find them again. Another reason could be that the owners were killed in war, or were

captured, or were deported. This often happened to the Jews, such that they could not come back for their treasure. Others hid their treasure and never told anybody about it. When they got sick and died, or got killed, the treasure would be lost.

When archeologists dig in a field, time and again they would uncover treasure. In Israel today, when bulldozers clear the ground, they would sometimes find treasure underneath, perhaps Roman coins, gold coins, or other valuables.

The Lord Jesus is talking about a practice that was familiar to the people of his day. It is unfamiliar to us today because we don't normally hide treasure in earthenware. But in ancient times, it wasn't uncommon for people to find treasure while working in a field. It may have been hidden hundreds of years earlier by someone who didn't remember the location of his own treasure, or was captured or killed.

Rain can wash away the earth, exposing the top part of the jar. A person walking through the field might think it is a stone. An earthenware jug in the ground may look like a stone, or a piece of potsherd sticking out of the ground. If you go to Palestine, you will find broken pot pieces all over the place, so you might not take notice of them. But this man noticed something, and when he took a closer look, he saw that it was a sealed vessel, and he immediately knows what it could be—treasure! Or someone may be plowing in the field, and then hits an object. Most people may think it is just a stone, but this man stops for a closer look, and finds treasure! He is filled with joy!

Finding treasure is not something that happens every day. When we take a walk, we would sometimes find a dime (a 10-

cent coin) lying on the ground. That's not bad! Or a quarter (a 25-cent coin). But it's not every day that you find hidden treasure. So the man is filled with joy, and what does he do? He goes and sells everything he has and buys the field.

## Why buy the whole field?

### 1. He could be charged with stealing

Immediately there are one or two legal questions we have to ask. Why doesn't the man just pick up the treasure and walk away with it? The treasure is partly visible but it is mostly concealed, so digging it up would not be a moment's work, but would take a while. But then you have a legal problem. Digging in somebody's field constitutes theft and trespassing, and you could be hauled to court for that. What is more, the owner of the field will not only take you to court for trespassing, you will lose the treasure to him. You have no legal claim to the treasure so long as the field belongs to the other person. Once you see the legal situation, you will see why the man doesn't dig up the treasure right there and then. Even if nobody knows where he got the treasure, if he is ever questioned about where he found it, he would have to tell them it's the field that belongs to the other person. Then they will ask him: Who gave you the right to dig in his field? Then you will be charged with trespassing and stealing.

## **2. The treasure doesn't belong to the owner of the field either**

There is another side to the matter. Does the treasure belong to the owner of the field by right? In fact, under Jewish law, it doesn't belong to the owner of the field. This is the other side of the legal issue that you have to understand. Under Jewish law, the treasure doesn't belong to the owner of the field, because when he bought the field, that was all he bought. He didn't know of the treasure buried in it. He could not buy what he did not know was there. So he cannot claim the treasure as his own after buying the field, because he didn't even know the treasure was there. That is how the Jewish law looks at the matter. The treasure doesn't belong to the owner of the field unless he himself found it prior to purchasing the field.

As for the man who found the treasure, the field is not his, so he goes and buys the field.

Legally speaking, the man is doing everything right so far. He knows that the treasure doesn't belong to the owner of the field under Jewish law, but also that he himself may not dig it up, for that would be trespassing on somebody's property.

You may ask, Why did he go into someone's field in the first place? It is because a path would often go through a field. The Gospels often speak of a path in a field. For example, the disciples walked through a field and plucked the ears of corn, which is allowed under Jewish law. You are allowed to walk through a field, but you may not dig in the field, for this would constitute trespassing. The only way he could legally claim the treasure would be to buy the field. Once we understand the

legal situation, we would see nothing unethical or wrong in this matter. Everything is being done properly.

## Two views of the parable

What then is the meaning of the parable? What is the Lord Jesus saying to us? There are only two possibilities: either the hidden treasure is Christ (in which case we find Jesus in the field, the world), or the treasure represents us (in which case Jesus finds us in the world). Which of the two is correct?

I would like to say from the start that the exposition of God's Word is neither guesswork, nor a matter of opinion, nor a matter of liking one interpretation over another. It is like trying to understand a legal clause in a legal document; it is not a matter of private interpretation for there are rules governing what a legal statement means. Similarly there are correct procedures for expounding the Word of God.

The popular interpretation is that the lost treasure represents Jesus Christ, and we are the ones who happen to find him hidden in the field. I used to accept this view, but I have since abandoned it after having studied and analyzed the parable more carefully. I am going to tell you the reasons for that, and let you be the judge of the matter. You will again see that, as in the case of the Parable of the Leaven, the evidence is overwhelming. That's why I ask myself, Why didn't I see it before? The reason was my doctrinal prejudice. I am going to confess to you my prejudice, so that you may see that our prejudices and indoctrination can close our eyes to God's Word.

## **Wrong view: The hidden treasure is Jesus**

As I was tackling this parable, I worked through both possibilities right to their logical conclusions through rigorous and faithful exegesis. I said to myself, “I don’t have an ax to grind. I just want to know what the Word of God says. I am on neither side of the matter. Just let God speak to me. May I be so open as to hear what He has to say.” I discovered that I had more prejudices than I had realized, and that is what I would like to confess to you.

We consider the problems first, because I want to clear them away and get on to the meaning of this parable. It is so rich and wonderful once you see its meaning. Let us begin with the view that the treasure is Jesus Christ, and that it is we who find this treasure. As I said, that was the view I once held.

I recently tried to work it through exegetically one more time, but this view would not go through. This is what I have discovered about the Word of God, that when an exegesis is wrong, you simply cannot get it through. In other words, you have to force the issue through the Scriptures because it refuses to yield to an inaccurate exposition of the passage. Let me explain what I mean by this. The problems are enormous when we take the view that the treasure is Jesus.

### **1. It is a repetition of the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price**

Firstly, this view makes this parable, the Parable of the Lost Treasure, simply a repetition of the next one, the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price, with the two parables saying nothing

much different. So you simply have two parables saying the same thing. Why would the Lord Jesus give two parables that say the same thing? Does he like to repeat himself? Is there any reason for him to repeat himself? This is the first point. But it doesn't really matter much. Maybe the Lord Jesus likes to repeat himself. He has the freedom to repeat himself if he wants to. That in itself is not a fatal objection, though it's an exegetical objection nonetheless, since I don't find that Jesus ever wastes words to repeat something that doesn't need repeating.

## **2. Does God hide Jesus in the world?**

Just a verses earlier, in Matthew 13:38, within the same discourse on the parables, we are told that the field is the world. So if we take the view that Jesus is the treasure, it would mean that Jesus is hidden in the world. If someone had hidden this treasure which is Jesus, it would be God. The more you think about it, the more meaningless it gets.

So the second objection is this: Would God hide Jesus in the world? It may sound plausible at first, but not when you begin to understand the exposition of this parable.

From the Parable of the Leaven which we studied last time, we saw that God does not hide the gospel or His salvation, for He wants us to be saved. So what then is this idea of God hiding Jesus, the Savior King He has sent? Do you find anywhere in the Bible's teaching of salvation that Jesus is hiding in, and from, the world? I cannot find it. If you find it, please tell me.

Many commentators interpret the leaven in the previous parable as something good, yet we saw that leaven in the Bible

always means something evil. They concluded without any exegetical reason that the leaven is the kingdom of God, and that God hides the kingdom in the world. But nowhere do you find that God hides the kingdom. The more I think about it, the less I understand the view that God hides the kingdom in the world. God does nothing of the kind.

We also saw in 2 Corinthians 4:3–4 that the gospel is not hidden; but if it is ever hidden, it is the god of this world who hides it from those who are perishing. Let us not attribute to God what Satan does. If there is any concealing of the kingdom of God, it's not God but Satan who conceals it from our eyes.

I don't find anywhere in the Bible that God's kingdom is concealed. Jesus is the light of the world, the shining sun in the world (John 8:12). He came to reveal, not conceal, God's light. The light is not hidden from the world. "No one lights a lamp to put it under a basket" (Mt. 5:15). He has said all this, so it has been made clear to us.

But even if Jesus wanted to hide himself, he cannot. Mark 7:24 says of Jesus that "he could not be hidden." He tried to hide himself from the people who sought him for the wrong reason—to gain benefits from his miracles—but he could not be hidden even for a brief moment. Such is the nature of Jesus that you cannot hide him, and he himself cannot be hidden even if he tried.

John 3:14–16 makes it plain that God does not hide Jesus whom He has sent into the world:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in

him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:14–16, ESV)

How plain is the message! Nowhere in the Bible do I find anything about Jesus being hidden. I challenge you to find one instance of that. No, Jesus came to be lifted high on the cross, so that whoever gazes at him will be saved from God’s judgment and have eternal life.

At the important Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, Jesus stood up and cried out for everyone to hear: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” (John 7:37–38) Jesus stands up time and again to teach and to preach. He says to those who are about to arrest him, “I stood in the public places, even the temple, which is the most public place in all of Jerusalem, to preach and to teach, yet you did not arrest me. And now you come in the night to arrest me?” (cf. Mt. 26:55). There is simply no way for you to exegetically prove that Jesus is the treasure hidden in the world.

### **3. Having found Jesus in the field, do you hide him again?**

If Jesus is the treasure that you find in the field, do you hide him again, and then sell everything you have to make him your own possession? What exactly does that correspond to in actual Christian experience?

The German commentator Rudolf E. Stier has great problems with this issue. He wrestles with this issue of hiding the treasure, but gets nowhere. So he simply says, “We conceal Jesus in our heart.” So one moment the field is the world, the next moment it is our heart. This shows the kind of twisting and juggling one resorts to in trying to make sense of it. Let us keep our facts straight. It is the world in which the treasure is hidden.

#### **4. Do we sell everything to buy the world?**

Following the logic of the view that Jesus is the treasure, what do you do after you sell all that you have? You buy the field.

Stier wrestles with this, and gets into a mess. He says that the field is the church. But nowhere in the Bible is the field the church, and Stier gives no evidence for this. The plain fact is that in the Scriptures, the field is never the church. Jesus already said that the field is the world just a few verses earlier, in Matthew 13:38. In the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel, the wheat is the church, with darnel sown among the wheat. The wheat crop is the church, the kingdom of God. But the field is not the church, contrary to what Stier proposes. In any case, what does it mean to give up everything to buy the church? Does it make sense?

Stier goes on to say that we appropriate the church. This makes no sense either because we don't appropriate the church; it is the church that appropriates us when we become part of the church. There is no way to make sense out of this view,

which is the greatest stumbling block to interpreting the parable.

## **Blinded by doctrinal prejudice**

Having dealt with this, let us look at the other view of the parable that doesn't interpret the treasure as Jesus, though he is the pearl of great price in the next parable. In the present parable, the evidence is abundant which shows that the treasure is not Jesus but us, the church.

I confess that in reading the parable of the treasure, in the past I was blinded by doctrinal prejudice, and the same could be true of you. The reason is that we are not accustomed to thinking of people, even ourselves, as treasure. The more I ponder the matter, the more I ask myself: Why did I reject the plain meaning of this parable? It is because I was brought up on the doctrine of original sin and the total depravity of man, which says that man is utterly rotten, corrupt, sinful, vile, and diseased. So what value is there in man who is totally depraved, who has inherited original sin, who is rotten to the core of his being, who is sick beyond remedy?

I see the value of a box of good and wholesome apples, but will I find any value in a box of apples that are rotten to the core and full of stench? They are worthless rubbish to be thrown into the garbage bin. Brothers and sisters, that is the way I was brought up to think of sinners. Were you brought up to think like that too?

I thank God for the words of the Lord Jesus! His words are like a sword that pierces into the heart and examines our intentions and understanding (cf. Heb. 4:12). It certainly revealed my attitude towards the unsaved. I feel humbled and ashamed of myself that I was brought up on this kind of doctrine. I regarded the unsaved as rotten and diseased, people of little value until God puts some value into them. How can you love them? You don't love rotten apples fit for the garbage bin. There is nothing you can do with sinful people, rotten and corrupt, except to reject them!

This kind of thinking has so penetrated some Christians that it has the most disastrous effect on the way we look at non-Christians. This view is taken to its logical consequences by some churches I have known personally and will not mention by name. They want to be so secluded from rotten humanity as to have nothing to do with them lest they, the good apples, be polluted by the rotten apples. You can only look upon perishing humanity with pity and condescension because they are rotten.

Combine this with the doctrine of predestination, and what will come out of that? An attitude towards non-Christians which regards them as utterly abhorrent: "These rotten people will be consigned to the flames of hell by God's predestinarian purpose!" Any Christian who thinks like this will have contempt for, and condescension towards, the non-Christian: "I, an elect of God, live in this world of corrupt men who are predestined to destruction."

This doctrine is most horrifying in the light of Scriptural teaching. Yet this is the kind of doctrine I was brought up on. I thank God for Jesus' words that revealed the arrogance—the spiritual arrogance—of my heart. There is no point in saying that all this is of God's grace. If "God's grace" can instill arrogance in our hearts, then God forbid that this be called grace.

I pray that God may so change my heart that I will look at people as the Lord Jesus sees them. How does he see them? As treasure! The more I study his teaching, the more it amazes me! He never saw them as rotten apples, or as worthless scrap metal, or as garbage. No, he saw them as precious! Only when we see people with Jesus' eyes will we go out to them in God's love. Only when we put away these doctrines which have corrupted our minds and put a subtle pride in our hearts, will we look at people with love. It's only then that we can say it is all of grace, unlike the so-called grace that makes you proud.

The Israelites fell into that pit, and we pray that we won't fall into it. Some Israelites say, "We are God's chosen people who are many cuts above the multitudes," just as some Christians speak of *massa damnata*—the condemned mass. *Massa damnata* is a Latin phrase used by Augustine. With all due respect to Augustine, "a damned mass of people" or "a condemned mass" is a fearful phrase that Augustine dared to use. What condemned mass? They are a treasure in God's eyes!

## God values the lost, but abhors the hypocrite

When God opened my eyes, and I looked at Jesus' teaching again, I was amazed that he never abhorred the unsaved person. Consider the three parables in Luke chapter 15. The first parable is the Parable of the Lost Sheep. The second is the Parable of the Lost Coin. The third is the Parable of the Lost Son. Are these things valueless? The sheep is valuable even today, and especially to a poor Palestinian farmer. The silver coin the woman lost is of great value to her. If the point is not clear enough, the Lord Jesus speaks of the lost son.

Why did God send Jesus into the world to die for "worthless" humanity? Why does God love the "rotten" and the "corrupt," a people in whom there is no goodness whatsoever?

The commentators give no explanation for this despite God's high view of humanity in Psalm 8:4: "What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?" The whole point of Psalm 8:4 is that God is mindful of man! And the psalmist himself marvels at this. Why is a great and powerful God mindful of man? The next verse (v.5) gives us a clue: "You have made him a little less than God" (NASB, HCSB, NRSV, RSV). No wonder God is mindful of man, for He has made us in His image, to be His sons and daughters. We are precious to Him, and are not rotten apples.

Psalm 115:12 says, "The Lord remembered us" (NIV, HCSB, ESV) or "the Lord has been mindful of us" (NASB, NKJV, NRSV). You cannot get any plainer than that. God cares for us, and is mindful of us, because we are valuable to Him! This is

even plainer in Zechariah 2:8 which says, “He who touches you, touches the apple of His eye” (NASB). These words were spoken to a rebellious nation, yet God regarded the people as precious!

God says of Israel, a disobedient and rebellious nation, “And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. (Hosea 2:19, NRSV). What is more precious to a man than his wife? God will not give them up, but will “redeem them from death,” and even “heal their apostasy” (Hosea 11:8; 13:14; 14:4).

We see the same picture in the New Testament. Whenever the Lord Jesus speaks of those who are lost, he speaks of them as having great value: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. The Parable of the Lost Coin in Luke 15:8–10 is “individualized” in the sense that God’s love is directed to each sinner individually as a lost coin. If you take a lot of lost coins and put them together, what do you get? Lots of lost treasure! Whereas Matthew gives a collective picture, Luke tends to focus on the individual.

When you put together a lot of lost coins, you will get lost treasure, which represents all lost sinners. Now we are getting to the heart of the parable.

In the Parable of the Lost Treasure, the treasure was lost because the original owner was either killed, or deported, or dead from illness. Or because he could no longer locate the treasure. He simply lost it, and someone else found it. This parable is Matthew’s counterpart of Luke’s Parable of the Lost Coin.

Now the meaning of it all begins to emerge. Once we get past our prejudices, we will see that a lost person is not, in God's eyes, worthless garbage fit for the fires of hell. On the contrary, he is most valuable to God!

You might ask, "What about the darnel?" Well, I hope that you have understood the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel. The darnel are worthless, but they are worthless not as unbelievers but as false Christians. And what about the chaff? The chaff are also false Christians. The chaff used to be part of the wheat, which in the Bible always refers to Christians. The meaning begins to emerge. The only kind of people who are spiritually valueless in God's eyes are the spiritual hypocrites. It is this kind of people, rather than the unsaved people, who are valueless. By contrast, the unsaved people are precious in God's eyes. They may be lost, but they are nonetheless treasure that Jesus came to reclaim for God. Please remember that you and I, in God's grace, were all part of that lost treasure which Jesus found in the field.

Once we get the correct meaning of the whole matter, the picture becomes exceedingly beautiful! It shows that God's heart reaches out to lost humanity. I hope you will understand that they are precious to God! They are a treasure to Him even if they are lost. God sent Jesus for this very purpose: to find you and me, the lost treasure.

Notice the beautiful symbolism in this parable. The treasure is buried and lost. Burial is always a sign of death in the Bible. The sinner is "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). We were lost and concealed in this world, yet Jesus finds us. "But God,

being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us ... made us alive together with Christ” (vv. 4–5). This is so beautiful! It brings out the significance and riches of the parable.

Consider the word “treasure” for a moment. The treasure consists of an earthen jar in which are gold or silver coins, jewels, and so on. The remarkable thing is that Paul applies this very picture to Christians: “we have this treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Cor. 4:7). The Christian has the treasure of the gospel in himself, which enhances his value to God—not just because of the value of the Christian himself, but also because of the treasure that God has put in him.

Going back to the parable, the Christian is now the “found” treasure, whereas he used to be the “lost” treasure as a non-Christian. This is the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian. It doesn’t mean that the non-Christian is not treasure, but only that he is “lost” treasure who is nonetheless exceedingly precious to God.

## **God aims to find the lost**

Let’s look at the word “find” as in finding the lost treasure. When we read the Bible, we see time and again that God searches for us with the goal of finding us. There is a beautiful verse in Psalm 119:176 in which the psalmist says, “I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments.”

Does this remind you of any parable? The psalmist went astray like lost sheep, yet something of God's "commandments" still remained in him. It reminds me of Paul's words, "With my mind, I serve the law of God; but with my flesh, I serve the law of sin" (Romans 7:25)—I am a slave of sin, yet I retain a knowledge of what is good.

Have you noticed that many non-Christians have a good understanding of right and wrong, and have a conscience? Has it ever struck you that a non-Christian often does deeds of kindness such as giving to the poor, and they do this not to save their own souls or establish their own self-righteousness? In fact, without the support from non-Christians worldwide, many relief organizations would be shut down. Let's not forget that the non-Christian also has a conscience, as Paul says in Romans 2:14–15. In Romans 7, Paul depicts the non-Christian as one who seeks to do what is good according to his mind, though he lives under the bondage to sin, and cannot overcome the power of sin. That is precisely the nature of the people represented by the lost treasure. It is true that some non-Christians continually think of evil, yet it is undeniable that there are others who have a conscience. God seeks every sort of lost people. In Psalm 119:176, the psalmist pleads, "Seek me, for I am lost."

We see this also in Ezekiel 34:11,12,16 where God speaks repeatedly of searching for His lost sheep: "I myself will search for my lost sheep," and in verse 22, "I will save my flock." The aim of seeking the lost is to save them, as in the three parables

of Luke chapter 15. In every age and generation, including ours, God seeks His lost people.

In every generation, God looks for people who are willing to serve Him, to function as light in the world, to bring others to salvation, as stated beautifully in Ezekiel 22:30 where God says, “I searched for a man among them who would repair the wall and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none.”

God could not find even one such person from that generation, so eventually Israel was destroyed. Today He is looking for people who will stand in the breach to save the world, to save the church. We are saved in order that we may save others, not just save our own skin.

1 Samuel 13:14 is a beautiful statement about God, “The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart”—a man who will do all His will, and that person was David. Will God find such a person today?

Jesus says that “the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:23). The next sentence says, “for the Father seeks such people to worship Him.” God is looking for people who will worship Him in spirit and in truth. He finds treasure in such people, those who worship Him in spirit and truth, and who turn away from their sins to be cleansed by the blood of Jesus—made pure and set free from the bondage of sin, so as to worship Him in spirit and truth. God is looking for such people today!

Jesus says, “The angels of God rejoice over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10). Each sinner is precious to God! Why all

this talk about garbage, rotten apples, and scrap metal, dignified by theological terms such as total depravity and the like? Each sinner is so precious to God that when one turns to Him, the angels of heaven rejoice! We don't see that, do we? It's because we have been indoctrinated to believe that a sinner has no value in God's eyes. Why then do the angels rejoice? Because the sinner has great value to God! How precious is this parable!

## **“Hide” occurs twice in the parable**

The word “hide” occurs twice in the parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure *hidden* in a field. When a man found it, he *hid* it again ....” (Matthew 13:44, NIV)

### **Do not hide but confess your sins**

When you do a careful study of the word “hide” in the Bible, you will find that it often has to do with sin or the consequences of sin. Right from the start of the Bible, what did Adam do when he sinned? He tried to hide himself from God (Gen. 3:10).

Have you noticed that every time you sin, you hide from God? It's not God who is hiding from you. When Adam sinned, it was not God who avoided the garden, but Adam who hid himself from God.

It's not God who hides His salvation from us. But because we hide ourselves from God, He is concealed from us, and His truth no longer strikes us. We hide from His light, so how can we see the light?

Often in the Bible, especially in the Psalms, we read that when we sin, God hides Himself, hides His salvation, and hides His truth from us. It is our sin that hides God's truth from us, not that He wants it that way. God hides His truth only from those who have hardened their hearts, whose eyes are closed and cannot see the truth. The truth is concealed from them, not because God wants to hide it, but because they have hardened their hearts against His truth. Then God spells out the final consequences of their rebellion: "Though you hide yourself from Me, My judgment will catch up with you" (cf. Amos 9:3).

When God seeks you out, and you don't run away from Him, you are on the path to salvation. Look at the words in Psalm 32:5 (NJB): "I said, 'I shall confess my offence to Yahweh.' And you, for your part, took away my guilt, forgave my sin." Isn't that wonderful? Unlike Adam who hid himself, the psalmist doesn't hide himself from God. When we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us. He is far from us only when we are far from Him (Psalm 13:1, 5; 27:9, 13–14).

When God calls to us, don't hide but confess our sins to Him, not making excuses as Adam did, saying, "It was because of this person or that person"—but say, as the psalmist said, "I am a sinner, but I won't hide my sins from you. I beg your forgiveness." (cf. Psalm 32:5) Then God will forgive you your sins.

The first step of salvation is to stop hiding. When the lost treasure comes out of hiding, it is going to be saved. Of course, in the nature of this parable, you cannot describe it in those exact words, since the treasure cannot come out of the earth by

itself. But in spiritual reality, when we stop hiding and confess our sins, God's salvation will come to us.

This is the first instance of "hide" in this parable, and we now look at the second instance.

## **Jesus hides the church**

You might ask, "Why did Jesus hide the treasure—the church—after he had found it?" Why would he hide it again?

Firstly, Jesus hides his own in order to protect them from God's wrath and judgment over sin. This concealing, after the treasure has been found, is for our safety and protection. We find this theme constantly in the Gospels, for example Luke 13:34, "How often would I have gathered your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." Why does the hen gather its chicks? To hide them! Hide from what? From the eagle flying above, which seeks to devour the chicks. So when we are saved, Jesus hides us in himself. We are still in the world, yet we are also concealed for our protection.

Secondly, the Lord hides us from evil men. "In the cover of your presence you hide them from the plots of men" (Psalm 31:20). This comes out beautifully in John 18:8. When some people came to arrest Jesus, he surrendered himself to them, but protected his disciples by saying, "Take me and let them go"—just as a hen hides her chicks under her wings. Jesus is doing exactly what he sees his Father doing, for God constantly protects and shelters His own people in the world (Psalm 27:5).

Thirdly, Jesus hides us from the enemy. Colossians 3:3 says, "Your life is hidden with Christ in God." We are hidden in the

world, yet at the same time are the body of Christ in this world—safe with Christ yet also in the world:

... Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world (John 16:32–33, ESV).

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one (John 17:15, ESV).

In the Parable of the Lost Treasure, we are no longer “hidden” in the sense of the first hiding (“hidden in a field”), but “hidden” in the sense of the second hiding (“which a man found and hid again”). We are now hidden with Christ despite being in the world. The riches and the beauty of all this is coming forth.

## **Jesus goes away to sell all he has to buy the field**

We notice the word “goes” in the statement, “Then in his joy he *goes* and sells all that he has and buys that field.” The Lord Jesus uses the word *goes* of himself, for he is going away, and departing from the field which is the world. This picture is constantly found in Scripture. This Greek word for “go” is also found in John 13:3, 33, 36, and many other verses. In each instance, Jesus is saying to his disciples, “I have to leave you behind in the world. Where I go, you cannot follow. You will

have to stay in the world, but I am going to protect you in the world. Don't be afraid! I won't leave you as orphans in the world, yet I have to go away." And that is exactly what he does. The "going away" means to die and depart to the Father.

When he goes away, what will he do? He will "buy the field." The Greek word for "buy" is also used in 1 Corinthians 6:20 and 7:23. In both places it says, "You were bought with a price." Jesus bought you! He redeemed you to himself. That is what he is saying in this parable. In 2 Peter 2:1 are the remarkable words, "even denying the master who bought them," referring to false Christians who deny the Lord Jesus who bought them.

This brings us to an important point about the parable. Matthew 13:44 says that the man "buys that field"—that is, he buys the world. This is exactly what Jesus did. I would like you to remember this: In Scriptural teaching, Jesus died not only for Christians, not only for the church, but for the sins of the whole world! That is the Biblical teaching. You see that in 1 John 2:2 (NIV): "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."

Jesus bought the field, that is, the world. As a result, all the lost treasures in this world, all the lost sinners in this world, are his by right. He bought them all! That is why he rejoices when a lost sinner repents. Can you understand this? He died for the sins of every person walking out there on the streets. He died not only for the sins of those who became Christians, the "found" treasures, but also for the sins of the whole world, the lost treasures. That is very different from the doctrine of predestination which says that Jesus died only for the elect. I

don't know how they got this from the Bible, for the Bible clearly says that Jesus bought the whole world. He sold all that he had to buy the world. He laid down his life to redeem the world to himself.

The phrase “sells all that he has” means that he gave up everything for us. That is what Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians 8:9, that “though he was rich, yet for your sake, he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” He became poor because he had sold everything he had. He gave up everything “that he might redeem us” (Titus 2:14). “He died for us when we were yet sinners” (Romans 5:8, 10). He died for us when we were still hostile to him and rejected him, in order to reconcile us to God (Colossians 1:21–22)

Jesus died for the sins of the whole world. He died for my sins before I ever believed in him, when I was still his enemy. That touches my heart. It's beautiful, isn't it? Jesus' teaching is so amazing because the whole gospel is summed up in a nutshell by this parable! How can you say it more clearly than that?

Although the whole field has been redeemed, it doesn't mean that Jesus completely possesses the field at the present time. Although John says that Jesus “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2, NIV), he also says that “the whole world is under the control of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). God created the world, and appointed Jesus to redeem it, so this world belongs to God. God also sent Jesus to set us free—by the

authority in heaven and on earth given to him (Mt. 28:18)—for we cannot set ourselves free from Satan’s power over the world.

This teaching is wonderful! Jesus sold everything in order to buy us. You have been bought with a price. You don’t belong to yourself, so you don’t go and live as if you belong to yourself. Nothing you are, and nothing you have, belongs to you. This jacket I am wearing, this necktie, this watch, my home, every cent in my pocket—everything belongs to Christ! I was bought with a price, so everything I have, every moment I live, every breath I take, belongs to him. “You and I belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God” (1 Cor. 3:23).

God sent Christ to redeem us, God’s treasure. Already in the Old Testament, Israel is God’s “treasured possession” (Ex. 19:5; Mal. 3:17). Christians are “God’s own possession” (1 Peter 2:9, NASB), a people belonging to God and precious to Him.

## **The three parables in Luke 15**

In the following paragraphs, we mention a few common objections raised by commentators against the idea that the lost treasure represents lost sinners. As it turns out, these objections are invalid for the present parable (the lost treasure) as well as the three parables in Luke 15, namely, the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son, all of which indisputably refer to a lost person.

**Objection 1: The sinner has no value until he is saved**

Some argue that a sinner has no intrinsic value prior to his coming to faith in God, which means that he cannot be the treasure. It is said further that a sinner acquires spiritual value only after he is saved.

This objection shows how deeply ingrained are our old prejudices. In fact, raising this objection against the three parables in Luke 15 would lead to absurdity, for that would mean that the lost sheep has no intrinsic value; that the coin has no value because it is no longer in the owner's pocket; and that the lost son is less valuable to the father after running away from home. It's hard to get over our prejudices, isn't it? Isn't a son as dear to the father when he is away as when he is home? Surely the son is always precious to the father even if he is lost. Surely a silver coin is precious whether it's in your pocket or lying on the streets for someone to pick up. Surely a sheep is of value even if it strays from the fold.

Old prejudices die hard until we start to think in God's way.

**Objection 2: The man does not actively seek the lost treasure**

Another objection is that man in the parable does not actively search for the lost treasure, so he cannot be the Lord Jesus. In the parable, this man merely stumbled upon the treasure with no indication that he was actively seeking it.

But that is an argument from silence, and it assumes that he didn't seek the treasure. One could also say that in the Parable of the Lost Son in Luke 15, the father seems to be inactive. He

doesn't go out to search for the son, it's the son who returns to the father.

In fact, no parable ever covers every teaching of the gospel, but only emphasizes one important central truth specific to the parable. The Parable of the Lost Son never indicates that the father was actively searching for his lost son, for that is not the central point of the parable; the central point is the repentance of the lost sinner. The Parable of the Lost Treasure likewise stresses one thing: finding the treasure is costly. God sent Jesus to sell all—pay with his life—in order to buy the field and lay a claim to the treasure.

### **Objection 3: Wouldn't God know where the lost treasure is?**

Another objection is that if it is Jesus who searches for the lost treasure, that would imply that God, the one whom Jesus represents, doesn't know where the treasure is. This cannot be so because God is omniscient.

But this objection doesn't work against the present parable, just as it doesn't work against the three parables of Luke 15, where it would imply that because God seeks the lost sheep, He doesn't know where it is. Or that God doesn't know where the lost coin is, since He has to search for it.

The lost treasure is said to be “lost” only to stress its state of “lostness”. The word “lost” cannot be taken to mean that the one looking for the treasure doesn't know where it is. That is not the point of the parable. We may be lost, and God seeks our response, but it doesn't mean that God doesn't know where we

are. The objection is inapplicable because the main point is about finding the treasure. Similarly, the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son bring out the truth that God seeks the lost and wants them to repent; God's omniscience is not the main topic.

From all these objections raised against the idea that the lost treasure represents lost sinners, we see that none of the objections is valid in the light of the parables of Luke chapter 15.

## **Colossians 2:3**

One of the reasons I used to think that the hidden treasure is Christ and not the church was Colossians 2:3, "in whom [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." The Greek word for "treasure" here is the same as in Matthew 13:44. Colossians 2:3 says that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ, which to some readers would imply that the treasure in the Parable of the Lost Treasure is Christ. This verse greatly influenced me to think of the treasure as Christ. But when I began to think more about it carefully and less superficially, I realized that this verse does not apply to the Parable of the Lost Treasure.

Colossians 2:3 is not speaking of a treasure but "all" treasures as being hidden in Christ. The only way to make Colossians 2:3 applicable to Matthew 13:44 is to say that Jesus is the field in which this treasure is hidden, and that we buy the field in order to obtain the treasure.

The problem with this is twofold. Firstly, nowhere in the Bible is the Lord Jesus ever depicted as a field or the world. And the second serious objection is that in this interpretation, you buy the field not because you are interested in Jesus, but because you want the treasures of wisdom and understanding that are in him. In other words, we are using Jesus as a means of getting wisdom and understanding, rather than turning back to God who gave Jesus the wisdom and understanding in the first place. That is a serious problem, and we cannot accept it as Scriptural teaching. When Jesus says he is the way, the truth, and the life, he is saying that he, the Christ appointed by God, is the only way to God; and there is no salvation apart from him. If we seek salvation, Jesus must be our Lord, and we must not make use of him to obtain something from him.

Applying Colossians 2:3 to the Parable of the Lost Treasure simply doesn't hold exegetically. Later we will see that Colossians 2:3 applies more appropriately to the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price, not this parable. Having considered the matter carefully, I think you can see that the only exegetically correct exposition of Matthew 13:44 is that the hidden treasure represents the lost sinners whom Jesus finds.

One more observation: If this parable does not actually speak of Jesus selling everything—sacrificing everything—in order to save us, it would mean that this central teaching about Jesus would not occur anywhere in all his parables. It would be surprising indeed if Christ's saving work is not found anywhere in all his parables. But once we see that this parable speaks of

Jesus' saving the lost, then this element of redemption does find an appearance in the parables.

## **Christians are God's "hidden ones"**

In the parable, the treasure was found and then hidden again in the field. The fact that Christ hides Christians is consistent with what is well established in Scripture, namely, that God hides His servants. Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise" (John 5:19, ESV).

It's remarkable that in the Old Testament, for example Psalm 83:3, the saints of God are called the "hidden ones"—hidden by God. The Hebrew text for this is translated as "hidden ones" in KJV, but in other Bible versions as "protected ones" (RSV), "treasured ones" (ESV), and "sheltered ones" (NKJV).

We can go through the Bible all the way to Revelation 12:6, a verse that speaks of a woman, representing the church or the kingdom, who is hidden by God in the desert. God prepares a place for His people in the wilderness.

## **A new attitude towards the non-Christian**

I leave you to ponder the meaning of the parable. But is it just a matter of opinion? Or is God's Word clear and unambiguous here? Once you understand the parable correctly, every part of the picture is meaningful! Every part of it vibrates with God's

life! But when you get it wrong, no part comes out meaningfully, and you can make no sense of it. Such is the nature of Biblical teaching, the Word of God, that it's not a matter of private interpretation. On the contrary, it is simply a matter of getting to the truth; once we have the key to it, it opens the doors of all the rooms in the house. But if you don't have the key, you will open nothing, for every door will be closed to you.

But the parable has been opened to us. To me, the most precious point is God's love for us, that He sends Jesus to search for us. What is most revolutionary to my own mind is that it completely transforms my attitude toward the non-Christian. As I said, I confess my error. I could not love the non-Christian just as I don't love rotten apples or scrap metal. But when I realize that these people are precious to God as treasure, albeit lost treasure, I will love them because God loves them.

I say again: a doctrine that regards the non-Christian as worthless is fit for the fire! A doctrine that regards them as a condemned mass predestined for destruction, is not a doctrine worthy of the gospel or the name of Christianity. It is revolting! It's a perversion of the truth! I pray that you and I may learn to see the lost sinners in the world as God sees them, and not to let our doctrinal upbringing hinder our appreciation of the statement, "For God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son."

I understand it now. God loves the world because lost sinners are precious to Him. I will go forth by God's grace, no longer looking at these people arrogantly, saying "I am chosen, you are not." Now it is simply, "I am a found treasure, and you

are a lost treasure, at least for the moment. But you are as much treasure as I.” The non-Christian is as much treasure as the Christian. The only difference is that one has been found by God’s grace, and the other has not yet been found, but will soon be, we pray.

We praise God for His wonderful Word that transforms our thinking and conforms us to Christ’s image. It makes us think as He thinks, and see lost people as He sees them. May God help us to go forth, to thank Him for His wonderful love, and to continue growing in it.



## Chapter 13



# THE PARABLE OF THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

Matthew 13:45–46

Montreal, September 10, 1978

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.  
(Matthew 13:45–46, ESV)

### **An expert discerns the value of the pearl**

**T**oday we continue our study of the Lord's parables, by looking at the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price in Matthew 13:45–46. Here the Lord Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a merchant, a wholesale pearl dealer, who seeks not just any kind of pearl, but "fine pearls," as it says here. On finding "one pearl of great value," he

went and sold everything he had. As a big businessman, he would have lots of assets and property. Yet he sold everything he had—thus giving some indication of the pearl’s value—and bought that pearl. What is the Lord Jesus saying to us through this beautiful parable?

I suppose that none of us here is an expert on pearls. A gemologist can tell us something about pearls. If you put before me a polished plastic pearl, or a pearl made of sugar, or a cultured pearl, or a genuine pearl, I would hardly know the difference from one to another. I suppose I could tell the sugar pearl by licking it. I am not sure that I can tell a well-polished plastic pearl, since plastics today are so advanced that it may be hard to tell it’s plastic. And I don’t have any idea how to tell the difference between a cultured pearl and a genuine pearl. Pearls are of enormous value, but you have to be an expert to tell the difference from one to another.

Some women wear a string of pearls around their necks. The pearls look beautiful, but I suppose that some can be bought for a few hundred dollars, while others thousands of dollars. I am no expert on pearls. I don’t know how to verify that a pearl is genuine. Am I supposed to bite it, or put it under a microscope? None of this would help me much since I wouldn’t even know what to look for.

But this merchant has discernment, and can tell a valuable pearl when he sees one. I hope that at least in the spiritual realm, I can tell one pearl from another. Unfortunately, in the area of actual pearls, I am no expert at all.

In the days of the Lord Jesus, they did not have cultured pearls like what the Japanese are producing today, by artificially injecting sand into an oyster and forcing it to produce a pearl. In ancient times, they could get only genuine pearls. These are found in the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean. But the Red Sea swarms with sharks! A diver would go down to a considerable depth at great risk to his life. I don't know how they kept the sharks at bay in those days. I have passed through the Red Sea, and have seen with my own eyes that if you throw a piece of meat into the Red Sea, the whole place would be swarming with sharks within minutes!

In those days, divers did not go down with oxygen tanks and sophisticated diving gear. They had to dive and hold their breath to look for pearls. And while looking for oysters, they had to watch that they don't get eaten by a shark!

We are not experts on pearls, but at least we know that pearls come in various colors and sizes. Some pearls have a pinkish shade, some have a bluish hue, some are pure white, some are small, some are big. The quality of a pearl depends on its color, size, shape, and flawlessness. Only when it is big and perfectly spherical would the pearl be considered of great value.

Just a few decades before the time of Jesus, Julius Caesar gave a pearl to Servilia, his friend Brutus's mother, that was worth a quarter of a million dollars! Wow! I don't know how one would wear this pearl. I wouldn't even know what to do with it.

But that was by no means the most expensive of pearls. According to the ancient writer, Pliny the Elder (Gaius Plinius Secundus), Cleopatra had a pearl that was worth five million

dollars in modern-day terms. It must have been a huge, beautiful, and perfect pearl. So it gives us an idea of how enormously valuable pearls were in those days. A pearl of perfect beauty, large size, beautiful color, and high luster, was enormously valuable.

Once we understand the value of the pearl in the parable, we can surmise that it was probably even more valuable than the lost treasure of the previous parable. We will keep this in mind as we listen to what Jesus says about the merchant, a big businessman with a wholesale business, who looks for fine pearls. This is clearly not the first time he has been dealing in pearls, since he is looking for fine pearls.

One day he discovers a rare and exceptional pearl for which he has to give up all his other pearls he has bought so far. In modern-day terms, he has to give up all his possessions—his yacht, his houses, his cars—to buy this one pearl, which may be worth five million dollars. It takes a big businessman to afford a pearl like this. Then he buys this pearl of enormous price.

I've spent some time on this topic so that you wouldn't think we are talking about some Kyoto cultured pearls, but about rare and exceptional pearls of enormous value. Today you can go to a jeweler and buy a beautiful cultured pearl for a few hundred dollars. But we are talking about a pearl of enormous value. It is not just any kind of pearl, but one that costs the merchant everything!

## What does the pearl represent?

What does this pearl represent in the Lord's teaching? What is the message of this parable? I would like to say again that expounding the Bible is not a matter of guesswork or blurting out the first thing that comes to your mind. Responsible Bible exposition would involve careful checking of the cross references.

But we are not left in the dark because the Lord Jesus uses the word "pearl" twice, with related meaning. The first time is in Matthew 7:6, the second time is here in Matthew 13:45. In Matthew 7:6, Jesus says:

Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you. (ESV)

### 1. The pearl represents something holy

A few things begin to emerge. First, notice the Biblical principle of parallelism: "Do not give what is holy to dogs; do not cast your pearls before swine." The word "pearls" stands in parallel to "what is holy" (which in the original text is one Greek word *hagion*). Hence "holy" and "pearls" stand in parallel, and similarly "dogs" and "swine" stand in parallel. This is a well-known Biblical way of expression, in which the same thing is stated in parallel form. You see this often in Proverbs and the Psalms. In this instance, it tells us that when Jesus speaks of pearls, he is thinking about something holy.

## 2. The value of the pearl must be discerned

Second, the value of “what is holy” has to be discerned, just as the value of a pearl has to be discerned. Dogs cannot tell the difference between what is holy and what is not, so Jesus says, “Do not give what is holy to dogs.”

Nor do you give pearls to pigs, because they won’t understand the value of pearls. If you give them pearls, they may even turn on you and attack you after having trampled on the pearls. Why? Because pearls don’t taste good, and pigs are only interested in food. If you give rice to pigs, oh, they will appreciate it because rice tastes good. But if you give them pearls worth millions of times more than a bowl of rice, they will attack you because they feel cheated: “We want rice but you give us pearls. I can’t eat pearls! You are cheating me!” They don’t understand the value of pearls, and don’t know that if you sell this one pearl, you can buy enough rice to fill a warehouse.

We immediately realize that in the language of Jesus, the pearl is spoken of as representing something holy, and because it is holy, it refers to something spiritual. That much is plain. Yet the value of what is spiritual still has to be discerned.

Paul makes this very point, that spiritual things are spiritually discerned:

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. “For who has understood the mind of the

Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.  
(1 Corinthians 2:14–16, ESV)

Dogs and pigs don’t have spiritual discernment, so they don’t know what is holy. The non-Christian too doesn’t understand what is holy and spiritual, for he lacks spiritual discernment. From all this, we begin to see that in Jesus’ teaching, the pearl is a picture of something holy and spiritual, which is discerned only by someone with a certain level of spiritual discernment.

Now what might that pearl be?

### **3. The pearl is something we make our own**

The third thing we notice are the words “your pearls” in Matthew 7:6: “Do not throw *your pearls* to the pigs.” These pearls are something we actually possess and make our own. Since this holy and spiritual thing is something we can make our own, that gives us a lot of clues, including the fact of its infinite value. So what can that thing be? In the parable of the pearl of great price, the pearl is Jesus, but what does pearl represent in Matthew 7:6?

## **Spiritual wisdom is more precious than silver, gold, jewels, pearls**

As the next step of our exposition, we turn to the Old Testament to see what a pearl may be. We see something along this line in Proverbs 3:13–15,

Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and its profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. (ESV)

In these verses, the one who is blessed—spiritually happy—finds spiritual wisdom, and acquires spiritual understanding, which is better than anything you could desire. It is “better than silver and gold,” and “more precious than jewels.” It is the most precious of all. Why is that so?

As you read on in Proverbs, you will see that it is through wisdom that you come to know God, and through wisdom that you gain eternal life in God. No wonder wisdom is so precious! We have seen that this is exactly what a pearl represents. Wisdom is something holy, something to be spiritually understood, something we can possess. That is what Proverbs says about spiritual wisdom, that it brings us to God.

Job 28:12 says, “But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?” This question comes from someone who is seeking spiritual wisdom and understanding, reminding us of the parable of the pearl, with the merchant asking, “Where can I find fine pearls?” Continuing in Job 28:

Man does not know its worth, and it is not found in the land of the living. The deep says, “It is not in me,” and the sea says, “It is not with me.” It cannot be bought for gold, and silver cannot be weighed as its price. It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, in precious onyx or sapphire. (Job 28:13–16, ESV)

Spiritual wisdom is found nowhere in the world, not even in the depths of the sea. Gold and silver cannot compare with the value of wisdom, not even the gold of Ophir, nor precious onyx or sapphire. Verses 17–20 say:

Gold and glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold. No mention shall be made of coral or of crystal; **the price of wisdom is above pearls**. The topaz of Ethiopia cannot equal it, nor can it be valued in pure gold. From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? (Job 28:17–20, ESV)

Here we see the word “pearls”. Spiritual wisdom and understanding are more valuable than pearls, topaz, and pure gold.

## Spiritual wisdom is in the Word of God

Where then do we find this spiritual wisdom, this understanding? We have questions without clear answers, but the Old Testament is not without an answer, for we have one in Psalm 19:7–10,

The Law of Yahweh is perfect, refreshment to the soul; the decree of Yahweh is trustworthy, **wisdom** for the simple. The precepts of Yahweh are honest, joy for the heart; the commandment of Yahweh is pure, light for the eyes. The fear of Yahweh is pure, lasting for ever; the judgments of Yahweh are true, upright, every one, more desirable than gold, even than the finest gold; **His words** are sweeter than honey, that drips from the comb. (Psalm 19:7–10, NJB)

Where can spiritual wisdom and understanding be found? In the Word of God! God's Word is described here as "the Law of Yahweh," "the precepts of Yahweh," "the commandment of Yahweh," and "the judgments of Yahweh." The psalmist says that "the Law of Yahweh is perfect," without blemish. It is "refreshment to the soul," for it gives life. The Word of God is "perfect"—like a perfect and spherical pearl without blemish. It is "wisdom for the simple" (notice again "wisdom"). It is "joy for the heart" (cf. the merchant's joy after he buys the pearl of great value). It is "more desirable than gold, even than the finest gold". Such is the preciousness of the Word of God that the finest gold cannot compare with it.

As we trace the exegesis of this picture through the Scriptures, the pearl in Matthew 7:6 refers to the Word of God. Now we understand the meaning of, "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs." The Word of God is precious to those who seek it; but don't stuff it down the throats of those who don't want it. They won't be grateful to you. It will only invite hostility, without any spiritual benefit to you or to them. Never stuff the precious Word of God down their throats against their will.

The pearl in Matthew 7:6 is the Word of God. The Word of God is holy, and we must have spiritual discernment before we can engrave it in our hearts for it to become our possession. Paul says, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col. 3:16a). Christ teaches us the Word of God, and if we store his teachings richly in our hearts, we will possess the Word of God.

## Jesus, the pearl of great price

We follow the exegetical procedure through the Scriptures, step by step, and not resort to guesswork, until we understand the message of today's parable.

Colossians 2:3 says, "All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ." More than that, God—the source of all wisdom, knowledge and understanding (Proverbs 2:6; 3:19–20)—was pleased to dwell in Christ in all His fullness (Col. 1:19).

The connection between wisdom and Christ—the pearl of great price—is further established in 1 Corinthians chapter 1: "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (v.24) and "Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God" (v.30).

## Concentrate on Jesus Christ

Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding **one** pearl of great value . . ." The word "one" here stresses the uniqueness of this pearl. Jesus is more desirable than gold, even the finest gold. There is only one pearl of great price, for there is only one Jesus Christ. The word "one" reminds us of "one thing" in Luke 10:41–42,

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but **one thing** is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:41–42, ESV)

Only “one thing” is necessary, not “many things.” Our lives have to be perfectly concentrated. I wonder whether your life is concentrated or scattered. Many Christians live a scattered life without a clear purpose or direction. But this pearl merchant knew exactly what he was looking for. He sought after it, found it, and bought that one pearl of great price that cost him everything he had.

You might ask, Is it wise to lose everything for one pearl? Why not settle for mediocre pearls, so that you can still keep your car, your house, your field, your business, whatever? That is the thinking in most people’s minds, for we haven’t yet understood Jesus’ words, “You are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary.” We are to follow him, his life example and his teaching, for he is the way, the truth, and the life who leads us to God. Concentrate on this one thing.

## **Concentration in the practical Christian life**

The principle of concentration extends to all areas of the Christian life. The one who tries to learn too many things at the same time will end up learning nothing well. But if a person, even if he takes up many activities, starts to concentrate on being really good at one thing, he will have a breakthrough at some point. I have found that this applies in every area of learning. To be good at anything, you have to concentrate on that one thing.

As an example from the secular world, I used to learn judo. Judo has various hold or grip techniques to throw the opponent

over the legs, over the hips, or over the shoulders. As one who likes to think things through, I thought to myself about how to be good in judo with its many grips, holds, and maneuvers. How do I become good at judo? Do I perfect myself in all the throw techniques?

It dawned on me that if I mastered one particular throw to perfection, I would be nearly unbeatable. I decided to test this by mastering the shoulder throw in which you take a person by his arm, swing around, and throw him over your shoulder. The reason I chose this kind of throw is that it is very devastating. One normally cannot get up quickly from that kind of throw, unless you are a judo expert.

I felt that, by contrast, the tripping throw—throwing a person over your foot—would make him fall, but he will be up the next second to attack you, which is not good. If you throw him over the hip, it is slightly higher, but not high enough to do considerable damage. After all, self-defense is to put the other guy out of action, not to spend the whole day fighting him! So I felt that the shoulder throw was the most effective one.

It is effective also because most of the other throws require you to grab his clothes. If it's a hot summer day, and he is wearing a thin shirt, what exactly do you grab? If you grab his shirt, you will end up holding it in your hand, which is no good! But the shoulder throw has the enormous advantage of not having to grab his clothes. All you need to do is hold his wrist or his forearm. You grab his wrist, and with one flick, he ends up crashing at the other end.

This suited me ideally, and so I spent hours perfecting this one throw. I worked out every movement in detail, to know what I have to do when the other person moves. I knew all the other throws, but I mastered this one to perfection.

The day came when I was ready to try it out. I didn't want to try it out on some guy who was on the same level as I, but on a judo expert, to see whether my move had been perfected sufficiently to cope with the best. So when my black-belt instructor came along—a huge fellow, six feet tall, muscular compared to my bony frame—I thought, “Fair enough, it's David against Goliath. Here's my chance to try it out!” He was a weightlifter as well, so you can imagine how strong he was. He could lift me off the ground and throw me down. That was not judo but weightlifting.

I asked him, “Can I have a little workout with you?” He said, “Sure, sure,” thinking who am I to take him on. He is the instructor, second dan black belt. We had a little workout, then I chose my moment and blitzed quickly. What a shriek of surprise came from him as all 200 pounds of him went sailing through the air, and hit the tatami mat with a loud thud! He was taken by surprise and quite shaken. And I thought, “So it does work!”

This is a lesson not only in judo but life as a whole: concentrate on one thing if you are going to be good at it. Don't mess around with a hundred things, because eventually you won't be good at any of them. If I had tried to perfect every throw, I would be unable to perfect any one of them except with a great investment of time and effort. But by concentrating on

one effective throw, I was able to perfect it to such an extent that I could throw an expert.

## **Concentrate on one gift to serve God**

This applies also to the spiritual life. Many Christians live scattered lives, and don't become good at anything in the Christian life. If you want to live the Christian life effectively, ask yourself before God, "What are my gifts? I am going to concentrate on one particular gift until I become really good at serving God." If every Christian thinks in this way, the church would be full of outstanding people! Many can sing, but one person among them may become an outstanding singer, praising God with his or her voice. If you have a singing voice, work at it. Train every day. Go up and down the scales. Find a piano, and practice on it even if it is damaged. Sing until you have perfected one song. Develop your volume, your control, your range, until you become outstanding.

You will then discover something interesting: when you become good at one thing, you will become good at other things. For some reason, being advanced in one area raises your general standard in all the other things you do. You will become better than most people in the other things, and exceptional in one.

If you have a gift in leading Bible studies, work at it! Learn to study the Word of God more deeply, and present it more effectively. I hope that those who are training for full-time service are doing this. I hope they will become experts at

exegesis. This was a goal of mine. For years I worked and worked at it, learning to understand the Word of God and to expound it, because having understood it, you still have to convey it to others.

You may be good at writing, so improve on it. Don't be satisfied with mediocrity. Work hard on improving your sentence structure, making your sentences clearer, and improving the general presentation of your message in writing.

I say again that every one of you has a gift. If I understand my Bible, there is nobody in the church who doesn't have a gift. Everyone has a gift in some area that can be used for God. Concentrate on that.

I concentrated on perfecting the one judo throw, not because I wanted to throw people for the fun of it, but to acquire self-defense skills that I can use effectively in all situations. You must understand that I was not a Christian in those days, so I would respond speedily with a martial arts move. Today I might react somewhat differently, for I am a servant of God, and would consider how I would act in the circumstances.

But above all, make sure that your purpose for concentrating on God's gift to you is a higher objective: pleasing God. Why would you want to perfect your singing? Is it not the means to the end of pleasing God whom you love? If you are leading a Bible study, or if you write, your objective would be to bring blessing to others and to be pleasing to God. If we love Him, should we not so live as to be pleasing to Him? It then becomes the means to that great end ahead of us: seeing Him in His kingdom.

## It costs us everything to gain Christ

The parable follows the “all or nothing” principle: the man sells all he has to gain the pearl. Such is his concentration that he counts everything as rubbish so that he may gain the pearl of great price.

Don't be scattered! Don't try, on the one hand, to love the world, making your nest in the world; and on the other hand to gain the pearl of great price. You cannot do that! Jesus is saying that if you want this pearl, it is going to cost you everything. If it doesn't cost you everything, you will never get it. It is as simple as that. Too many Christians don't seem to understand this, from what I can observe of how they live. They think they can have the best of both worlds and still end up gaining this pearl of great price, as well as God's eternal life through Christ. But that won't happen. That is the Lord's teaching, not mine.

The Lord Jesus says, “If you want to be my disciple, sell everything you have and follow me.” That was what he said to the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16–22, but the young man didn't understand this. He asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life? I have kept the Law.” Jesus replied, “If you want to be perfect, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” (v.21) By the word “perfect,” Jesus was not talking about achieving moral perfection. We can never be absolutely sinless or morally perfect in this life. In Biblical teaching, perfection in this life is not sinless moral perfection but the perfection of total commitment, which is the minimum requirement for salvation.

In a different incident, a lawyer asks the Lord Jesus,

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:36–40, ESV)

Jesus gives this same message to the rich young ruler, “If you want to inherit eternal life, keep the commandments, the two greatest of which are to love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself. How do you love God with all your heart? By selling all that you have and give to the poor, your neighbor. Then come, follow me.” Perfection in the Bible is total love for God.

In Luke 12:32–33, Jesus says the same thing to his disciples,

Fear not, little flock, for it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. (Luke 12:32–33, ESV)

How much is that one pearl worth to you? Do you want to have it for nothing? Do you want to have Christ for nothing? That is not what the Bible teaches. That pearl will cost you everything. Until it does, you won’t have the pearl. It’s as simple as that. The merchant, having discovered the pearl, has to sell all that he has to purchase it. What does it mean? It means a

total commitment to Christ, and fixing your eyes on him. This in turn will reflect your total commitment to God his Father; it is to concentrate your whole being on loving God fully.

If you don't do this, your witness for God will count for nothing. No wonder many Christians go through life having no witness. They are not lights in the world. They behave like non-Christians. They think like non-Christians. They are a little bit more religious, nothing more. In Bible teaching, being a Christian is not like that. The Bible teaches total commitment such that wherever you go, your dedication, your commitment, your total love for God, your unconditional obedience to Jesus' teaching—all these stand out! Everyone will know that you are a committed Christian, that you have given all to follow Christ.

As I have said endless times, I am not talking about full-time service but about a heart attitude towards God. I have said many times that many in full-time service are not totally committed. For them, being a pastor is a profession, their bread and butter—or their bowl of rice, as the Chinese would say. It is just a job that has nothing to do with total commitment. I hope that those who hold the office of pastor are totally committed, and will not conduct themselves as if the two—commitment and the pastoral office—don't necessarily go together.

## **You will find God only if you seek Him with all your heart through Jesus**

Are you like the merchant who searches for the priceless pearl? Do you seek what is spiritually valuable? If you are only seeking the world, this parable would be meaningless to you, for it addresses people who are seeking this pearl of eternal value.

Why does Jesus compare himself to the pearl of great value? It is because only when you have Jesus will you be able to build a relationship with God. God reveals Himself to us through Jesus, so that we may come to know the only true God through Jesus. Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Are you willing to come to know God with an unwavering determination to seek Him, and to build a friendship with Him?

When Jesus told the parable of the pearl, he may have had in mind the following words of Moses spoken to the Israelites:

If from there you start searching once more for Yahweh your God, and if you search for him honestly and sincerely, you will find him. (Deuteronomy 4:29, NJB)

Bear in mind this promise, that you will find God if you search for Him with all your heart, all your soul. If you have not yet found God, remember these words. You may be seeking Him, yet not with all your heart and soul. You still lack this determination of purpose.

Who can find God? Only those who are totally committed to seek Him with all heart and soul. God will be found by those

who search for Him and for the truth, with a total commitment that says, “If I find God, I am willing that it will cost me everything.” Why would you seek Him if He doesn’t mean much to you in the first place? What does His Son, Jesus Christ, mean to you? One pearl among many? Then you have not understood the value of this pearl, and you are not worthy to gain it. Jesus says, “He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Mt. 10:38), for he has not yet understood the preciousness of Jesus.

We are not talking about believing in some religion, but Jesus the Son of God, “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), whose value has no price! You cannot put a price tag on him. If you have not yet understood this, you will think that what you possess is worth more than that pearl. If the merchant thought that all his possessions were worth more than the pearl, he would not sell everything to buy it, would he? Especially if he thinks it’s unnecessary to do so.

If you visit a jeweler and find a pearl that costs \$300, and if after looking at your possessions you say, “I can pay the \$300; I don’t need to sell everything to buy that pearl,” then you have not found it worth all that you have. But if you see a pearl with a price tag of \$3,000,000, that is a different matter! You now realize that this pearl is of such great value that getting it will cost you more than everything you have.

What value do you place on Jesus? From the way many Christians live, he is clearly not very valuable to them. They may give him one or two hours on Sunday, even five or six hours over the stretch of a week. They may give a monthly

offering of few dollars or maybe even \$200, but is Jesus worth everything to them? That is the question.

The one who buys that pearl is the one who sells everything and is totally committed. This is different from the Christianity you have heard, but it is the teaching of Jesus. Does your Christian life measure up to it?

Can you say with Paul in Philippians 3:8, “I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ”? Paul regards the pearl as being of greater worth than everything else put together. He counts all the cherished things he has ever gained not merely as valueless, but as rubbish, that he may gain Christ. Do you have Paul’s mentality?

## **The pearl has the perfect characteristics of Christ**

In conclusion, consider the picture of this beautiful pearl that represents Christ. The roundness of the pearl represents the perfection of Christ. The whiteness of the pearl represents his purity and holiness. The radiance of the pearl represents his glory and beauty. The pearl is produced by suffering, just as Jesus’ faith and character are shaped by suffering in doing God’s will. As Hebrews 5:8–9 says:

Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. (Hebrews 5:8–9, ESV)

Do you see Christ as that beautiful, priceless pearl, who is worth all your possessions to buy it? I hope that the message of the priceless pearl will get through to you. The whole emphasis of this parable is this one thing: Gaining this pearl will cost you everything. If it doesn't cost you everything, you have not yet obtained that pearl of great price.



Chapter 14



SPIRITUAL VALUES VS.  
THE HUMAN SENSE  
OF VALUE

Matthew 13:45-46

(Translated from Putonghua by W. Yee)

Hong Kong, June 15, 1997

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matthew 13:45-46, ESV)

**T**he Parable of the Pearl of Great Price in Matthew 13:45–46 is a short parable of only of two verses, yet it has an important message. I preached this parable almost twenty years ago, but you cannot exhaust all the riches in this parable in one or two messages. So we return to this parable today.

## **You are what you value**

Today I would like to speak about the human sense of value. I would like to ask all of you: What are your values? What do we mean by values? It means what you think is valuable, and what you think is not valuable. What is the importance of values? A person's values reveal his mentality and direction of life. When you talk to a person, you can tell his character by what he says. For example, if you ask him, "How is the stock market doing today? Are the shares going up or down?" If the shares go up, he rejoices, but if they drop, his face drops. For me, I am not the least interested in the stock market. I don't understand it at all. I also don't wish to understand it, because I don't have the money to invest in it, and so this subject does not interest me. But some people invest their whole lives in the stock market. As soon as they wake up in the morning, they start thinking about their stocks. When they go to bed, they dream about their stocks. This is their sense of value. So what do they like to talk about? They talk about stocks and shares. Others like to talk about the real estate market. Still others like to talk about fashion and design. Some talk about food, and which restaurants

have good food. I'm sorry, but I am bored with this subject, not that I don't like food. Although there is value in food, it is of less value to me.

That is why I say a person's values reveal his mentality and his direction of life. This is very important. If a person wants to change, but doesn't change his mentality and his values, he cannot change. A person must change his values before his life can be changed. You can tell what a Christian's values are when he opens his mouth. If all he talks about is "my job, my interests, my family, myself," and is preoccupied with himself, then you should ask, what kind of Christian is he? He is absolutely no different from a non-Christian, because he has not changed his values.

That is why I have to ask you, what are your values? Supposing you live at home, when your parents look at you, will they think, "Oh, this person is entirely different from the others"? Or will they think that you are no different? If you are no different from the others, your parents will think, "Why should I believe in God?" So you can see how important your values are.

## **Do you value Jesus Christ enough to sell your all?**

This parable is about a merchant, and what does he value? He is in search of fine pearls. How strange! Are you interested in pearls? Frankly I'm not. Yet this merchant sold all he had to buy a pearl of great price. Now I honestly can't understand this!

Would you sell all that you have to buy a pearl? Even if you see a beautiful pearl, how would you continue living after selling everything you have to buy it? If you sell all you have, it means that you will have nothing. Can you eat this pearl when you are hungry? Or wear it when you are cold? Or turn it into a house when you need a place to stay? You will say, “I really can’t understand this parable. I have no interest whatsoever in pearls. How can I understand this parable?”

But this merchant’s sense of value is different from ours. We Chinese people like to be practical. What is all this talk about buying pearls? Buying pearls is all right, but it’s a different story to sell all that you have to buy a pearl of great value. What is the Lord Jesus saying to us? Is he telling us that we don’t have to be practical? Is he saying that it doesn’t matter if you have nothing to eat after selling all that you have? Does he mean that it doesn’t matter if you have no warm clothes for the winter as long as you have a priceless pearl? If you see a man walking around holding a pearl, you would say that he is crazy and question his sense of value.

What I am trying to get at is this: What does it mean to believe in God? When you first believed in God, did your parents say to you, “You can believe, but don’t go to extremes”? That you don’t have to be like this merchant who sells all that he has? Spending a few hundred dollars on a pearl ought to be good enough. But selling all that you have to buy it is a joke! So are you joking when you talk about total commitment to God and being justified by Him, because you believe that Jesus died so that your sins may be forgiven? If you give up all that you

have, will God feed you when you are hungry? Is God going to clothe you when you are cold? Will God give you a home when you have no place to stay?

What is this pearl of great price in the parable? This priceless pearl is Jesus Christ, to whom God has given all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3) in the Word of God, the pearl (Mt. 7:6); and in whom God, the source of all wisdom, knowledge and understanding (cf. Prov. 2:6, 3:19-20), was pleased to live in all His fullness (Col. 1:19).

How much is Christ worth to you? Would you lose your job for the sake of Christ? If you see something unrighteous happen at your place of work, do you dare to speak up? If you speak up, you would lose your “rice bowl”. Do you dare to stand for holiness and truth? How much do you value God’s holiness and truth? You might reason like this: “The whole world is like this, and we have to survive in the world. Standing up for God’s holiness and truth is good, but let’s just compromise.” What are your values?

A professor of psychology at the University of Southern California did a research study. He put a tape recorder on each of the 20 people he selected, to study what these 20 would talk about every day. And he discovered something very interesting. He found out that each of these 20 people told a lie every 8 minutes on average! That means to say, each person lied 200 times every day! This is an astonishing discovery indeed! This professor concluded that in our society today, you cannot survive if you don’t lie. And he continued to say that in fact our society needs lies in order to progress. So according to this

professor, progress depends on lies! Our whole society is built on falsehood! But we must not laugh at this professor.

Supposing you are late for a Bible study, would you say, “I didn’t plan my time well, so I’m late. I’m really sorry”? You would not say this, would you? You will lose face! What reason would you give for not planning your time as a Christian? “Well, I’m late because the subway was so crowded that I couldn’t get in.” Or you might say there was a traffic jam. It wasn’t your fault that you are late. Have you ever acknowledged that you are wrong, that it is nobody’s fault but your own? You may excuse yourself and think this is only a very small lie that doesn’t matter. But if you can tell a small lie, it should not be hard to tell a big lie.

## **The phenomenal value of the world’s biggest pearl**

How much do we value Christ? Why is something valuable to some and not to others? Why do stocks and shares have such high value to some people, but are valueless to me? Perhaps one reason is they are rich and I am not. Why is Christ so valuable to some, but valueless to others?

I am going to talk about pearls again. I recently read an article about the biggest pearl in the world. Would you like to guess how big is the biggest pearl in the world? We look around and see many pearls the size of green beans. Have you seen pearls the size of a peanut? That is a sizeable pearl. What about a pearl the size of a broad bean? That is bigger than a peanut.

Have you seen a pearl of this size? Then take a guess at how big the biggest pearl in the world is. Would you like to guess? What if the biggest pearl in the world were the size of my fist? You must think this is a joke. Do you believe that it can be that big? What would be the value of a pearl of this size?

The Lord Jesus says in the parable that a merchant found a pearl of great price, and he sold all that he had to buy it. He must already be a rich man, yet he still had to sell all that he had to buy it. This pearl is so costly! I am afraid that if I were to sell all I have, I wouldn't even be able to buy a small fraction of this pearl. Now if the pearl is the size of a fist, exactly how much will it cost?

In May 1934, on one of the islands in the Philippines called Palawan, a youth and his grandfather who were fishermen were looking for some clams to eat. Close to the shore of this island were some coral reefs, and they felt that they could find clams among these reefs. There are huge clams in the Pacific Ocean in the Philippines, and how big are they? They often measure 1.2 meters wide. That is a jumbo clam! It is not like the small ones that we buy at the market. Certainly the two men cannot finish such a giant clam.

This youth and his grandfather found such a clam, and they opened it up. When they looked inside, they shouted! What did they see? The most gigantic pearl in the world was right in front of their eyes! How big was it? How big do you think the biggest pearl in the world is? The pearl the two men found was not spherical. Pearls come in different shapes. This one was 9½ inches long and 5½ inches wide. To help you visualize it, I have

cut out a piece of paper according to these dimensions. It is almost bigger than my head! Isn't such a pearl mind-boggling! So the two men took this pearl back to their village, and all the villagers exclaimed that they had never seen such a giant pearl before. Generally speaking, pearls are found in oysters, and very rarely in clams. Scientists say that the possibility of finding a pearl in a clam is one in a million, and these two men found one such clam! All the villagers studied it and found it just amazing.

You are probably wondering, what is the use of this pearl? Do you know how much this particular pearl weighs? It weighs 14 pounds and one ounce, which is approximately 6.5 kilograms.

What do people usually do with pearls? Usually people would drill a hole through a pearl, put a string through it, and wear it around the neck. But you can imagine what it is like wearing this gigantic pearl around your neck! Which woman would be willing to wear it? If she puts it around her neck, she would not be able to stand up straight under the weight.

They thought about the matter, and came to the conclusion that this pearl is truly phenomenal, though not very useful. That was their sense of value, and what was it based on? It was based on whether or not a woman can wear it around her neck. To them, this gigantic pearl had no value since a woman cannot wear it around her neck. So what did they do with the pearl? They put it aside. This happened 63 years ago in 1934.

In the same year, an American businessman somehow heard about this giant pearl, and began to track it down until he found

this youth and his grandfather. And he discovered that they did not value this pearl because it could not be worn around a woman's neck. So he said to them, "Why don't I give you something that you would find useful, and you give me this pearl in exchange?" He gave the grandfather some things that were worthless to himself, but were of interest to this elderly man. Then the grandfather and the youth handed this pearl over to the American businessman! This businessman hid the pearl at his home in the United States, and did not tell anyone about it from the time he got it in 1934 until the time he passed away in the United States in May 1980.

Then in 1984, four years later, this pearl landed in the hands of an auction company, and many people got acquainted with this pearl at the auction. Right there, two Americans bought it for US\$200,000. But by 1988, within four years, the value of this pearl had soared to US\$4,000,000! How quickly the value of this pearl increased!

Now, in 1997, this pearl is currently worth US\$42,000,000. What is this amount in Hong Kong currency? It is HK\$3 billion! Do you think this pearl is valuable? What do you think its value will be after a few more years? This pearl is now kept in a bank safe in California. Isn't this very interesting?

A news reporter decided to visit the man who had originally found this pearl when he was a youth. Of course, his grandfather had long passed away. The reporter asked him, "Do you know the current value of the pearl that you found? It is worth nine billion Philippine pesos (US\$42,000,000). Can you even imagine this enormous sum?" Ninety thousand pesos is already

beyond the understanding of this simple fisherman, let alone nine billion! In fact, the number nine billion is beyond my understanding. How many zeros are there? This is truly mind-boggling! But this poor man never got one cent out of this giant pearl! Why? Because his grandfather had exchanged it for a few playthings offered by the American businessman. The reporter asked this man, “Are you sad about it?” Do you know what the reply was? The man said, “That’s okay. If there is any woman who can wear this 14-pound pearl around her neck, let her enjoy it!” Do you see that this man still cannot change his mentality? He has limited his mentality to his fixed sense of value, namely, that a pearl is to be worn around the neck.

## **You cannot change if your values have not changed**

Now you can see where our problem lies. A person cannot change if his values do not change. His values have been locked in by his mentality. This is the reason many “Christians” have never changed their values after believing in God. Their sense of value is the same as that of non-Christians. There are many such Christians in the church. They are still thinking what is the value of truth? Truth cannot provide you with food. It cannot provide you with clothing. It cannot put a roof over your head. It is an ideology that cannot provide you with the essentials for living—food, clothing, housing. Why then should we believe that God is just, and justifies everyone who has faith in Jesus? (Romans 3:26)

Is this how you look at it? That was exactly how that youth and his grandfather thought, and so they could not appreciate the value of that priceless pearl. It is the same today with many who hear about God and Jesus Christ, and they ask, “What’s so precious about them?” They cannot see the value of God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent (John 17:3).

I hope to inspire you so that you will continue to ponder on this matter. I am talking about a big and important subject in which many important principles are involved. But in our limited time, we can only look at a few points.

## **You can’t simultaneously hold two sets of values**

Another principle is this: You cannot hold on to two sets of values at the same time. Many Christians have not straightened out this aspect of their thinking, so their faith is bound to collapse. It is like the fact that you cannot embrace democracy and totalitarianism simultaneously, because these two are opposites. Or you cannot think that it is important to acquire more knowledge while hoping to live a not-so-diligent life at the same time. If you want to enjoy an easy-going life, then you won’t be able to acquire deep knowledge. So you have to choose between enjoyment and knowledge. Some people want to make money, but don’t want to work hard. Of course, they won’t be able to make money. You must make up your mind about what you want. Some Christians want to have spiritual things, eternal things, but they want to have the world as well. Well, you

cannot ride two horses at the same time. You have to choose between two sets of values, whichever is more valuable to you.

## **People perish without a sense of value**

There is another kind of person who has no values at all. Have you ever come across such people? I have. And I am unable to make head or tail of them because I don't know how to engage them in conversation. I say to myself, perhaps I can talk to him about politics. But there is no response from him because he is indifferent to politics. Or maybe he likes the sciences, so I would talk to him about physics or medicine. Although my knowledge on these subjects is superficial, he might just talk if he finds the topic interesting. But he is not interested in science either. I try to think of other topics, but nothing interests him! Strange, what values does this person hold? I discover that he is content if every day he has food, watches TV until bedtime at 11 p.m., and goes to work in the morning. He is like a robot! He has no values whatsoever.

Even more tragically, there are youths who are searching for values but cannot find any. Do you know that a few hundred youths commit suicide in the United States every month? They see no value in their own lives. To them, life is meaningless and valueless. When they run into a problem no matter how small, they commit suicide to end their misery. How tragic!

I recall the days before I came to God. I was looking for direction in life, searching for something in the world that is valuable and worthy to pursue. I found it quite difficult. As a

result, like many young people at the time, I threw myself into patriotism. How many young people were disillusioned by the misery and poverty of war. How many Chinese adults and outstanding youth have sacrificed their lives for their country. As a youth, I desperately pondered back and forth on how to find my sense of value in a world that lacks values. I wanted something to hang on to even if that sense of value might end up being empty.

Many elderly people talk about food all the time, and this is tragic because they cannot find their sense of value in this world. They feel that they can at least relish the enjoyment of food. I don't think we should be critical. Rather, we should be sympathetic.

## **Ask God to reveal His spiritual values to you**

I said that in this parable, this pearl of great price represents Jesus, who is the only way to God (John 14:6). How then would I know that he is real? The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:12,

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. (ESV)

Here Paul says that when we are of the world, we simply would not be able to understand spiritual things.

What should I do if my sense of value is constrained by the sense of value of this world, and if I cannot see spiritual values,

let alone see the value of Christ? In my own experience, I know that we can understand something only when God reveals it. You would remember that the Lord Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And what was Jesus’ reply? “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 16:15–17)

How are we going to see spiritual values? We will see only when we have a heart that pursues the truth, and when we ask, “O God, please reveal to me the reality of Yourself, of Christ, and of Your Word. Please open the gates of truth to me!” Is there any hope in this? Certainly there is hope! In Matthew 7:7—an easy verse to remember—the Lord Jesus says, “Keep on seeking, and you will find.”

## **Give your life to serve God, and endure to the end**

My final words of exhortation are directed to the leaders of our churches, my coworkers. The first thing I would like to say to them is, when you pursue the truth, don’t give up because you are tired. You know that every servant of God often feels so tired in serving, that he or she just doesn’t have the spiritual motivation to continue to serve, to do good. At that point of exhaustion, you might feel, is it worth pursuing, or should you throw in the towel? That is why the New Testament tells us twice: do not grow weary in doing good (Gal. 6:9; 2 Thess. 3:13).

Secondly, the Lord Jesus says that the merchant in the parable sold all that he had. To be honest, none of us has sold all that we have. You are still relatively young. If the Lord Jesus doesn't return yet, you will still have 20 to 30 years of life ahead of you. As long as you still have life, you have not yet given all your life to serve God totally, so you have not sold all that you have. Your life is the most valuable thing to you. You must continue to sell and give all of the rest of your life to God. Don't stop and don't give up. You must understand that this is the significance of the Lord Jesus' teaching in this parable. You must endure to the end. Many believe in God, but few endure faithfully because it is difficult to endure. The longer the time, the fewer will arrive at the end. You have to shoulder the responsibility of shepherding, to be an example to the church. You must understand that your endurance is the example you will set, so that the church will see that you continue to endure faithfully to the end, in fatigue, in weakness, and in poverty or prosperity.

When you offer up your final breath to God in this way, with the love of Christ constraining you (2 Cor. 5:14), you can rest assured that this pearl of great price, Jesus Christ, will be yours forever.



## Chapter 15



# THE PARABLE OF THE NET

Matthew 13:47–50

Montreal, September 17, 1978

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:47–50, ESV)

## The kingdom of heaven attracts people of every kind

**T**oday we continue our study of Jesus' parables by looking at the Parable of the Net, or Dragnet, in Matthew 13:47–50. This is the seventh and last in the cycle of parables in Matthew chapter 13. By “cycle” we mean a sequence of parables, in this case the following seven parables: of the sower; of the wheat and the darnel; of the mustard seed; of the leaven; of the lost treasure; of the pearl of great price; and of the net. As the last of these, the Parable of the Net very appropriately emphasizes God's judgment.

The Parable of the Net, like all the other parables in Matthew 13, deals with the kingdom of God, that is, God's government. The word “kingdom” could just as well be translated “government”.

Why are we interested in God's government, by which God is King in our lives? Because only when this is fulfilled will we have eternal life. Only those who live under God's government, who have God as their King, will enjoy the life that He gives. It is clear that if you don't live under God's kingship, if God is not King in your life, you cannot expect to have the benefits of His kingship.

If I don't have Canadian residency and don't live in Canada, then by Canadian law I don't enjoy the benefits of life in Canada. But once I enter Canada, I am under the law of Canada. Even a visitor to Canada is under the law of Canada. If a visitor or a foreigner does something against that law, he will be punished according to its stipulations. Even in minor things

he is subject to its regulations: he will be fined if he parks his car on a wrong spot. It doesn't matter whether you are Canadian or not, so long as you are in Canada, you are under Canadian law.

When you enter the kingdom of God, you are under the law of God. To enjoy the benefits of being in God's kingdom, you have to be under His rule and government. I am reminded of Confucius' saying, *luan bang bu ru* (亂邦不入): "don't go to a country that lacks public order or a proper government". To enjoy the benefits of life, don't go to a country where there is no proper government, but to a country where there is good rule. That is the case with the kingdom of God. Do you want to enjoy the benefits of a life in which there is righteousness, peace, joy, love, understanding and holiness? The place in which these things are found is the kingdom of God, in which you commit to live under God's government.

The Lord Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind." Applying this imagery to a country with good government, you can see that a good government attracts people of all kinds, not just good people but also bad people. Strangely, even gangsters seek a country that has good government. That is why even good countries have moral problems.

Everybody is attracted to a good country because a good government provides a good economy and a high standard of living, things that people seek. Where there is bad government, the standard of living goes down. That is why economics plays

an important role in elections. During an election, the incumbent government tries to demonstrate that during its administration, the standard of living has gone up, and inflation has decreased. When the inflation and unemployment rates are bad, the government is in trouble, for the people will then say, “We don’t want a government that doesn’t provide good governance. We need a new leader because our standard of living has been affected.” In every nation, all people, good and bad, want good government and a high standard of living. Thus the kingdom of God is like a net that is thrown into the sea and gathers fish of every kind.

## Fishing in Galilee

Few of us are fishermen. I do a little fishing myself, but I am not a fishing expert, especially not in net fishing. I picture Jesus teaching this parable by the Sea of Galilee where the people watch the fishermen draw in their nets. Let me try to paint for you a picture of what they see.

The method of fishing in the parable is called *seine fishing*, that is, fishing with seine nets, though the word “seine” doesn’t appear in your Bibles. Seine fishing is done with a very long net attached to one or two boats. One end of the net is fixed to the shore, the other end is drawn by a boat that sweeps out away from the shore. Then it sweeps back in to trap the fish against the shore. Or if two boats are used, they would go out together to circle the fish, and then approach each other to close the gap

between them, trapping the fish. The boats would come to shore together, towing the fish that got trapped in the net.

This method of fishing is not used in the middle of the lake where the water is deep, but only close to the shore. The top end of the net would float on the surface by means of floats such as cork or empty containers. The bottom of the net is weighed down, and dropped to the bottom of the lake. It sweeps along the bottom of the lake, or near the bottom, to prevent the fish from going under the net and getting away. This long net spreads out in the waters as it is being towed by the boats. Now you can picture how the net catches the fish.

To this day, this type of fishing is still being used for commercial fishing in the Sea of Galilee. The long nets are now drawn by modern fishing trawlers.

In the parable, when the boat comes to shore, the fishermen would haul the net ashore, which contains fish big and small, good and bad, all trapped inside. Once on dry land, they are sorted. Fishermen don't want fish that had died in the nets, or are weak or not healthy; nor do they want fish that are too small, for they have little commercial value. That is the picture of fishing with these nets. Once you have the picture in your mind, you can see more clearly the Parable of the Net which the Lord Jesus uses to speak about the kingdom of God.

Fish as a picture of men is familiar in the Bible. Fish are like people in many ways. People swim and move about in life, doing their usual business of feeding on small fish, as the Chinese would say, *da yu chi xiao yu* (大魚吃小魚): the big fish eat the small fish, the small fish eat the smaller fish. The world

in which we live is compared to a world of fish. Some experts have counted 24 species of fish in the Sea of Galilee. Out in the Mediterranean are hundreds and hundreds of species. These various species of fish portray the various nations and the various types of people in the world. There is a great variety of fish. Some are big; some are small; some have sharp teeth; some just feed quietly on insects, crabs, and small lobsters. There are all kinds of fish, just as there are people with different appearances and different characters.

Habakkuk 1:14–15 says:

You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. He brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net; he gathers them in his dragnet; so he rejoices and is glad. (Habakkuk 1:14–15, ESV)

Here peoples and nations are compared to fish. The context speaks of the Chaldeans (v.6), an aggressive people in ancient times, a powerful nation that conquered the world. It is like what we see in the parable: bringing peoples and nations into the net. In this case, it is a powerful nation that conquers other nations, bringing them under its power and influence. So in the Parable of the Net, the kingdom of God is pictured as going forth into the world and bringing in people through a spiritual rather than a physical conquest.

That is why servants of God are called fishers of men, as we see in Matthew 4:19 where Jesus says to his disciples, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

The scholar Alfred Edersheim says that the Jewish writings often compare men to fish.

In Ezekiel 12:13, especially in Symmachus (a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures), God speaks of capturing Israel in a net:

I will spread my net over him, and he shall be taken in my snare. And I will bring him to Babylon, the land of the Chaldeans, yet he shall not see it, and he shall die there. (Ezekiel 12:13, ESV)

The picture of being caught in a net implies to some extent that they are taken unawares, drawn in by a certain power.

## Other parables of a similar nature

Every aspect of the Parable of the Net is so rich in meaning that I have to be selective in how to present the parable. We are told in verse 48 that the net was drawn ashore “when it was full.” The word “full” reminds us of Matthew 22:10 in the Parable of the Wedding Feast, where the Lord Jesus brings out the same idea:

And those servants went out into the roads and **gathered** all whom they found, **both bad and good**. So the wedding hall was **filled** with guests. (ESV)

The servants were sent out to invite people to a wedding feast, similar to the picture of a net bringing in various kinds of

fish. Everyone likes a wedding feast just as they want a good government, so they come to the feast. Both the good and the bad are gathered in; they come to the wedding feast—the kingdom of God—to get something out of it.

In Matthew 13:47, which says that the net “gathered fish of every kind,” the Greek word for “gather” is also found in Matthew 25:32, in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats, where it expresses the same idea:

Before him [Jesus] will be **gathered** all the nations, and he will **separate** people one from another as a shepherd **separates** the sheep from the goats. (Mt. 25:32, ESV)

Here the Greek word for “separate,” in regard to the separation of the sheep and the goats, and the righteous and the cursed, also occurs in the Parable of the Net: “separate the evil from the righteous,” referring to separating the good fish from the bad (Matthew 13:49).

Hence several parables are similar to the Parable of the Net in meaning. The judging of the evil and the righteous in the kingdom of God is a very important element in the Lord Jesus’ teaching.

## **There will be judgment at the end of the age**

When is the net brought to shore? When it is full. It reminds us of Romans 11:25 in which Paul speaks of the day when “the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” at the end of the age. This

has not yet happened because the net is not yet full. But when it is full, God's purpose will be complete, the end will come, and the net will be pulled ashore.

Interestingly, the Greek word translated as "gathered" in Matthew 13:47 ("gathered fish of every kind") is translated as "welcome" in Matthew 25:35, 38, 43 (ESV, NJB, NRSV, RSV): "When I was sick ... when I was in prison ... when I was hungry ... you did not *welcome* me." But to the righteous the Lord Jesus will say, "you *welcomed* me".

The kingdom of God extends a welcoming hand to everyone. The invitation is not exclusive but inclusive. Everyone is invited to the kingdom even if you are not a Christian. That is more than can be said of most countries where strict immigration laws are in place: we welcome you if you conform to a certain type of person, and meet our immigration requirements. But the kingdom of God welcomes everyone! It doesn't mean that the welcome is unconditional; yet it is a genuine and open welcome. For God so loved the world that whoever wants to may come!

It doesn't mean that you are automatically saved just because you are in the kingdom of God. We are uncomfortable with this truth because we tend to think that everyone in the kingdom of God is somehow automatically saved. There are good fish and bad fish in the kingdom, and the bad will be thrown out at the end of the age. Many in the church claim to be Christians, but God will throw them out at the end of the age. That is the warning of the parable! Don't think that because you are in the church or are a Christian, you are saved.

This brings us to a crucial point of this parable. Where is the distinction between the good fish and the bad fish? What defines a good fish—a true Christian—and what defines a bad fish—a false Christian? A key distinction is that false Christians will be thrown out at the end of the age, at the Judgment. We see that this parable warns of the Judgment.

If you claim to be a Christian, what kind of Christian are you? That is the crucial question. Do you think you are safe just because you are in the kingdom? Then listen to what Jesus has to say. He warns us that just because you are in the kingdom of God now, that is not a guarantee you will be saved at the end. It will depend on a sorting that will take place at the end of the age. In this parable, in verse 13:48, when the net is drawn ashore, the fish will be sorted.

## **The sea represents the perilous unpredictable world**

What does the sea symbolize? In the Bible generally, and not just in this parable, the sea symbolizes the world. The Lord Jesus uses picture elements which are familiar to people who have studied the Bible.

How is the sea a picture of this present world system? The sea is something that people imagine as unstable, uncertain, and unpredictable. If you have ever gone on a boat, you would know what I mean. It is all the more so in the Lake of Galilee, where the waters are completely unpredictable. You don't know when a storm may hit. It may be calm and sunny in the

lake, but within minutes, a storm may arrive, and your boat is bobbing up and down, thrown around quite a bit. Even experienced fishermen have gone down with their boats. The sea is unpredictable and unstable, changing all the time. And you sometimes even wonder what is underneath!

I wonder if you have ever done long distance swimming. I was once swimming across a wide river in China's Hunan province, and I could not help feeling, "What lies underneath in the river?" You keep wondering whether a strange creature might grab your leg! That's because you have heard of good swimmers who disappeared without a trace while swimming. When one is swimming long stretches, especially alone, he would often wonder what may lie hidden in the depths of the waters.

The Bible pictures the sea as something unstable and uncertain. Paul speaks of "the perils in the sea" in 2 Corinthians 11:26. The sea is a dangerous place that hides many perils. Even powerful ships have disappeared into the sea. When they built the Titanic, they built solid compartments into it, and said the ship was unsinkable. Of course we know that it sank on its maiden voyage! It went down and never came back. It fell victim to yet another unpredictable danger in the sea: icebergs. Icebergs are mostly submerged and barely visible.

There are many dangers in the sea. The sea is pictured in Job 38:8–11 as a monster that has to be shut behind doors, controlled by God, because the sea can threaten you even on land: "thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed" (v.11). You don't have to be in the

sea to be wiped out. Great tsunami waves have swallowed entire towns, sweeping away tens of thousands of people, and inflicting enormous damage to the tune of billions of dollars. The sea is pictured as unstable, threatening, and dangerous, and limits have to be set on it.

## **The shore: The end of this age**

The sea ends at the shore, at which it has reached its limits. What is the meaning of the shore? The shore is where a limit, a door, a barrier, is set for the sea. The picture of the shore is designed in this parable to tell us of the end of the present time in the world, the end of this age. Then the world will come under God's judgment. As we read in the Psalms, at God's judgment, when God bares His arm for salvation, the world will tremble with fear and flee from His presence. We read in Psalm 136:13 and Isaiah 43:16 that God makes a path through the Red Sea to deliver His people from the perilous waters.

In the world we face restlessness, turmoil, and the instability of war and peace. Will you be safe from God's judgment by hiding yourself in the world? Of course not! Even if you flee and hide in the uttermost parts of the sea, God is there! (cf. Psalm 139:9–10) Don't think that you are safe from God's judgment by hiding in the world and thinking that He doesn't exist.

As I said, unbelief is no grounds for security. If you don't believe in something, it doesn't mean that it isn't true; it only means that you think it isn't true. Unbelief only says something about you, not the facts. If I don't believe there is a fire in this

building when there is one, my unbelief won't put out the fire. I wish it would, but it won't. The fire of God's judgment won't disappear just because you don't believe in the Judgment. Unbelief doesn't remove the facts. It only determines your attitude towards them.

I will believe that this house is on fire when a trustworthy person tells me there is a fire even if I don't see it. He shouts, "There is a fire in the building!" I look at him and say to myself, "This guy never lies. So if he says there is a fire, there must be a fire." I rush out so that I won't get burned up in the building!

When the Lord Jesus tells me of the Judgment at the end of this age, I will say, "He never lies. If there is going to be the Judgment, I had better be ready for it." You may say, "I don't believe it," but the Judgment won't disappear just because you don't believe it will come. It only determines your attitude and response to that event. When I talk to unbelievers, they would often say, "I don't believe it," thinking that because they don't believe it, they are secure. How foolish!

I believe in the words of Jesus because I have tested his words for 20 years and they have never failed. I know that when he says something, it will come true. He has never once made a mistake. The Lord Jesus is the only one who has dared to say, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Mt. 24:35). If he says that there will be a judgment, then there will be a judgment. His words have never failed. If you say, "I don't believe what Jesus says," that's up to you. When the Judgment comes, you had better figure out what you are going to do. By then, it will be too late to do anything. Now is

the time to do something about it. It will be too late to flee from a building when the flames have encircled you. It is when the flames have not yet surrounded you that you can get out. It is when the Judgment has not yet gotten hold of you that you can still do something about it. That is Jesus' warning in this parable: At the end of this age, at the end of this period of the world, when we reach the shore, there will be the hauling in of the net.

## **Bringing up the net: A picture of the resurrection**

This parable has an interesting word, “bring up,” which is one word in the Greek. The Lord Jesus doesn't waste words. I never cease to be amazed that he can say so much in so few words, whereas most of us need to spend much time to expound what he says. In verse 48, he uses one Greek word, *anabibazō* (ἀναβιβάζω), where it is translated “drew it ashore” (ESV), but it literally means to “bring up” the net. The word *anabibazō* is unique for it occurs only once in the Greek New Testament. Its significance comes out when you compare it with Acts 24:15, in which Paul says we will be brought up at the resurrection: “... having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.” (ESV)

You may say, “I don't believe in God or the teachings of Jesus. When I die, that's the end of the matter.” If it were only the end of the matter, it wouldn't be so bad. The problem is that it's not the end of the matter.

Let's look at the picture. The net is drawn up and out of the sea, and the fish are brought up. It's an amazing picture of the resurrection! Jesus uses this rare Greek word to bring out the idea of being lifted up at the resurrection—the just and the unjust, the good and the bad—such that even those who have already died will be brought back at the resurrection to face the Judgment. They hope they won't have to face the Judgment, but the Judgment won't disappear just because they don't believe in it. The bad fish hope that they will die and be buried, and that's the end of it. But that's not the end of it. They will be brought up at the resurrection to face God's judgment.

In fact, the kingdom of God—God's government—extends to the whole world. If you don't acknowledge His government, that is not a reason for Him to exempt you from judgment. If you don't obey His government, it doesn't mean that you will escape His judgment. If a gangster in Montreal doesn't submit to the law of Canada, it doesn't mean that he is beyond the jurisdiction of Canada. On the contrary, precisely because he lived in utter disregard for the law of Canada, the law will be that much more severe with him. Everyone will fall into the hands of God, not only because He is King of the church, but also because He is King of the world by reason of His having created the world and providing redemption for every person. He has provided a pardon in Christ for everyone who has ever sinned. There is no excuse for anyone to be bad, or to remain in sin.

This parable may appear to be simple, but in it we have the key to all the various pictures. Let me summarize it like this: the

sea is the world; the fish are people; and the bringing up of the net out of the sea is a picture of the resurrection.

## **The net: Proclamation of God's word of salvation**

What then is the net? Even the net itself is full of significance. In verse 47, the Lord Jesus uses the word "cast" of the casting of the net into the sea. In his teaching, he uses this word several times in various connections. In the Parable of the Sower, we see the casting of the seed, which is the Word of God. The Parable of the Mustard Seed speaks of the casting of the mustard seed. In each case, the casting of the seed has to do with the preaching of the Word of God, directly or indirectly. I am not giving you all the instances of this word "cast," but when it is used of casting the net, it is a picture of the proclamation of God's Word of salvation, which draws people into the kingdom of God.

People seek salvation out of various motives. It may be a purely selfish thing in which I just want to reserve a seat for myself in heaven. Or it may be something deeper: I am tired of sin and rottenness in my life, so I want to be healed and to be changed, in order to make a useful contribution to my fellow humans in this world. That is already a much less selfish motive. Or you may begin with a selfish motive, but God gradually changes it into something less selfish. What is important is that there is a change in you. If no change has taken place, you may end up among the bad fish and be thrown out. The Greek word

literally means “to throw out,” in this case out of the kingdom of God.

## **Are the bad fish the same as the darnel?**

What do the bad fish represent? What the good fish represent is easy enough for us to understand, but what do the bad fish represent? In the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel, we saw that there are two kinds of people in the kingdom of God: the wheat, which is the good Christians, the true disciples; and the darnel, which has the outward appearance of wheat, but is not wheat. In fact darnel is poisonous, just as false Christians are poisonous and do terrible harm in the world. Such people are not neutral parties. How many people have refused to become Christians because of false Christians? The poison of these false Christians has done enormous damage to the gospel because they outwardly resemble wheat.

In the Parable of the Net, we have two kinds of fish. How do we understand the good fish and the bad fish? Is this parable similar to the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel? Yes, they are similar, yet not the same. Where is the difference? The difference is significant, and it lies in the fact that the darnel are darnel *by nature*, that is, they did not change into something else. That is the first point.

The second thing to notice is that it is Satan who sows the darnel into the church. These are the false teachers and false Christians who have come into the church, but have never

changed their character. Yet they talk and behave like Christians. The Lord Jesus portrays them in Matthew 7:15 as “false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” These false Christians talk and behave like Christians in the church. They get baptized and partake of the sacrament of communion. They do everything that Christians do, but deep in their hearts, they have never committed their lives to God, so they remain in their old nature. They have never been regenerated, nor humbly surrendered to God to ask for His forgiveness and transformation. In other words, they are simply non-Christians dressed up as Christians. They are sinners in their nature, and have changed only their outward appearance. The dirt on the outside has been washed off, but the dirt inside remains.

These false teachers and false Christians are “whitewashed tombs,” as Jesus calls them in Matthew 23:27. They are whitewashed on the outside and look nice, but inside there is corruption and death—“dead men’s bones.” That is the picture of the darnel, people who have never been changed.

Many people become “Christians” but are not any different from non-Christians because they have never allowed God to change them. They have never become the new creation that Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians 5:17. These people do great damage to the church and to its reputation, because everyone can see that they behave like non-Christians, in fact worse than non-Christians because at least the non-Christians don’t pretend to be righteous or religious. But false Christians have the outward appearance of being religious. They walk around

with their big Bibles, go to church, talk piously, but inside is rottenness! In fact they are non-Christians in the worst possible sense.

## The bad fish was formerly good

So what is the difference between the darnel and the bad fish? Again we have to turn to the Greek to understand it. A key word in the Parable of the Net is *sapros* (σαπρος); it is used in Matthew 13:48 where it is translated “bad” (in the statement that the “bad fish” was thrown away). This is no ordinary word for bad. When it is used in Jesus’ teaching, it always refers to something rotten or corrupt. For example, Jesus uses *sapros* in Matthew 7:17, “A good tree brings forth good fruit, but a *rotten* tree brings forth rotten fruit.”

What does *sapros* mean? It basically means corrupt and rotten, a definition you can find in any standard Greek-English dictionary (one standard lexicon has *rotten, putrefied, corrupt* as the first definitions of *sapros*). When you check the usage of *sapros*, you will see that the meaning of this word is different from the general concept of badness, for it implies a *transition to bad*. “Corrupt” implies that something was good before, but later became rotten. A corrupt or rotten apple was originally healthy, but became rotten over time. Perhaps a worm got into it, or it became diseased, hence what was originally healthy became rotten.

The word *sapros* is also used of a person who becomes sick. He was healthy at first, but became diseased. His health is being

corrupted by disease. That is how the word is used. It is also used of the process of aging by which a young man becomes, over time, decrepit in his old age. You have seen elderly people who have become decrepit, crippled by this and that disease. Their mind slows down, and there is memory loss. A person who was once strong and healthy has become sick and weak, and then dies as the final result of this corruption.

From the word *sapros*, we see that the bad fish is quite a different symbol from the darnel. The darnel was never good in the first place; it was bad by origin. It has always been poison wheat. But the bad fish was once good but became bad. This distinction is important to notice.

Another point that we need to clear away: When the parable speaks of the bad fish, it is not referring to fish that are levitically unclean in the Old Testament as in Leviticus 11:9–12. The Israelites were prohibited from eating levitically unclean fish that were regarded as ceremonially unclean for having no fins or scales. I am surprised that some commentators who ought to know better, say that the bad fish in the parable are thrown out for being levitically unclean. This is incorrect because the word *sapros* never means ceremonially unclean. Nowhere in the Greek Old Testament does it have this meaning. It always refers to something that was once good but then became bad.

Hence the Parable of the Net is not a mere repetition of the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel, for the word *sapros* brings in a new and important element: the fish are bad by corruption, not by origin. The fish were once healthy, but became sick or

even died, leading to their being thrown out of the kingdom of God.

The German scholars are clear about this. For example, Rudolf E. Stier says:

The fish in question were fish indeed which might have made good food, but which, unfortunately, have died in the net, amid the swarm, and have become corrupt.

Stier is saying that as the nets are being brought to shore, or as the fish are being surrounded by the net, the crowding of so many fish results in quite a number dying. This also happens with animals when they are corralled; as they stampede, some get crushed to death.

The great German scholar, H.A.W. Meyer, translates *sapros* as the “putrid ones,” where “putrid” means corrupt. He says, “These bad fish which were already dead and putrefying, are yet enclosed in the net.”

So both these German scholars say that the word *sapros*, translated “bad,” refers to something that was originally good but became corrupt within the net over time.

## **The first love for God grows cold**

With that we come to a close. The basic lesson is this: The people represented by the bad fish responded to God’s Word of salvation, which is the net, and were drawn by it into the kingdom of God. But unlike the darnel, they were not planted in the kingdom by Satan. They are not the spiritual fifth

column inside the church. On the contrary, they responded genuinely to the Word of God. So what happened to them? Eventually they turned away, this being a common problem that the New Testament deals with: Their love grows cold, and they backslide to the point of departing from the faith.

We see this in Scriptural teaching. For example, in 1 Timothy 4:1–3, Paul tells Timothy that the Spirit explicitly says that in the last days, when the net is drawn ashore, many will depart from the faith. There is no point talking about “departing from the faith” unless you are in the faith. Here we find this very picture of people who came to God, and were even active in the church.

I think of the Chinese church in London that I was once in. I have shared with you that the young people in the church were enthusiastic for God. One person would be busy in this, another busy in that. One would organize a Chinese Christian Fellowship here, and another would organize another CCF there. We started one in Hong Kong House, then another in Malaysia Hall. Oh, we had a great and busy time! We were building up the church of God. My question is, where are these people today? Without exaggerating, 90% of them are gone! Yes, some of them still go to church occasionally, but they now behave virtually like any non-Christian.

What happened? The fire that once burned has died. The spiritual health they once enjoyed has become corrupt. They have gone into spiritual degeneration. That is precisely the warning in the letter to the church in Ephesus: “You have lost your first love. Your love has grown cold. Repent and do the

things you did at first, or I will remove your lampstand.” (cf. Rev. 2: 4–5)

That is exactly what happens in the parable. The bad fish were once healthy. As Stier says, they may have been good for food, but now they are rotten and corrupt. They died spiritually in the net. From this important distinction, we see that this parable is no mere repetition of the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel.

## Exegesis by John Chrysostom

I am not alone in my exegesis of this parable because it is in full accord with the early church fathers and the great modern scholars I have mentioned, though I would sometimes differ with them. I would like to read to you something that John Chrysostom, the great Greek commentator of the early church, wrote on this parable. Chrysostom was the greatest of the early church preachers. He was called the “golden mouth”; the name Chrysostom consists of the Greek words *chrysos* (χρυσος, gold) and *stoma* (στομα, mouth)—“golden mouth.”

He was used powerfully by God in the early church of the fourth century. The following is what he preached in his 47th homily, or message, on Matthew. I now read some excerpts from the homily because they are stated so beautifully:

After this [the parable of the wheat and darnel], that we may not be confident in the gospel merely preached, nor think that faith only suffices us for salvation, he [Jesus] utters also

another, an awful parable. Which then is this? That of the net.

When Chrysostom says that the Parable of the Net is “awful,” he simply means that it inspires fear or awe, because you must not think you are saved just because you hear the gospel. Or that you will be saved by a faith that is all talk and no works, with no holiness or righteousness. Chrysostom goes on to say:

And wherein does this differ from the parable of the tares? For there too the one are saved, the other perish; but there, for choosing of wicked doctrines; and those before this again, for not giving heed to his sayings, but these for wickedness of life; who are the most wretched of all, having attained to His knowledge, and being caught, but not even so capable of being saved.

Chrysostom asks where does the Parable of the Net differ from the Parable of the Darnel? The darnel were wicked from the start and had never changed, whereas the bad fish are wicked people who were once good but have since become corrupt and no longer live in holiness. They came to know God like fish caught by Christ, the fisher of men who proclaimed God’s Word of salvation. They came into the church, yet were “incapable of being saved” (Chrysostom). These people are most wretched.

Chrysostom was in fact the Archbishop of Constantinople, the leader of the church in the Eastern Roman Empire. But this great man of God was later put to death because he condemned

the wickedness of the churches which were under his care. He goes on to say:

For lest, on being told, “They cast the bad away,” thou shouldest suppose that ruin to be without danger; by his [Jesus’] interpretation, he signified the punishment, saying, “They will cast them into the furnace” [Mt. 13:50]. And he declared the gnashing of teeth, and the anguish, that it is unspeakable.

Chrysostom is saying, “In case you think that being cast out is without danger, look at what happened to the bad fish. Were they merely thrown back into the sea? No, look at what the parable says: ‘throw them into the furnace of fire; there they will weep and gnash their teeth.’”

That is utter destruction! Yet many today think that being cast out is not a great danger; it only means that you won’t enjoy certain blessings, but you will still be saved.

Finally, John Chrysostom sums up like this:

Seest thou how many are the ways of destruction? By the rock, by the thorns, by the wayside, by the tares, by the net. Not without reason therefore did he say, “Broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go away by it.” [Mt. 7:13]

Chrysostom is saying that it’s not without reason that many go by the broad way that leads to destruction. In the Parable of the Sower, the birds ate the seed that fell by the wayside. As for the seed that fell into the rocky soil, when the sun came up, it

destroyed those who initially received the gospel with joy. As for the seed sown among the thorns, they were choked despite having received the gospel. And in the Parable of the Net, some fish became corrupt and died in the net.

Chrysostom taught and preached in Greek, so he would quote Matthew 7:13 from the Greek text. Instead of saying “go into” destruction by the broad road, he says “go away” to destruction. But “go away” from what? Go away from Christ and from God. Chrysostom was speaking of apostasy! This great preacher, like many early church fathers, did not teach a doctrine of “once saved always saved,” in which one is saved irrespective of the sinful life he lives as a Christian. Chrysostom would have none of that. This is how he concludes what Jesus taught in the seven parables:

Having then uttered all this, and concluded his discourse in a tone to cause fear, and signified that these are the majority of cases (for he dwelt more on them). He saith, “Have ye understood all these things? They say unto Him, Yea, Lord.”

Chrysostom is saying that Jesus concludes his seven parables on a note that strikes fear in the heart, namely, the fear of being corrupt despite having been forgiven and healed from sin. Despite having received the new life, they become like those whom Peter speaks of: “The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mud.” (2 Peter 2:22)

## The concluding warning

We now conclude. What does the Lord Jesus say in verse 49 of the Parable of the Net? At the end of the age, the righteous will be separated from the evil. Significantly, Jesus doesn't speak of them in terms of believers and unbelievers, but in terms of evildoers and the righteous. Only the righteous will be saved.

What does Jesus mean by the righteous? One thing he makes plain in this parable is that we must beware of being corrupt. Recall the Lord's powerful and frightening words in the Sermon on the Mount: "Be careful lest the light in you become darkness. And if the light in you is darkness, how great is that darkness" (Mt. 6:22-23). If the salt of the earth—the Christians—"has lost its taste, how will its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men." (Mt. 5:13) And the fish that becomes rotten will be thrown into the furnace of fire (Mt. 13:50).

The Lord tells us that the righteous are those who, having been transformed by God, persevere in holiness without being corrupt. Let us pray that by God's grace, we will not be corrupt in any way, or be among the fish that were once good and then became bad. It is vital to receive God's life, and then persevere in it, going from strength to strength to become the righteous who will be saved.



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