THE PARABLES OF JESUS

The Sons of the Kingdom

Because the kingdom of God is first of all spiritual and inward, not outwardly observable, it is more of a reign than a realm. The kingdom of God is advanced through the lives of those who embrace it. To become a disciple of Jesus is to become a "child of the kingdom." The good seed in the field of the world are the "sons of the kingdom" (Mt. 13:38). Jesus taught that unless one changes and becomes like a child, he can never enter the kingdom (Mt. 18:3-4) and that the kingdom belongs to those who are like children (Mt. 19:14; Mk. 10:13-16; Lk. 18:16-17). So, what does it mean to be a child of the kingdom? Often, Jesus explained using parables of contrast, such as, the two builders, the two sons, the two debtors.

SONS OF THE KINGDOM

The phrase "sons of the kingdom" (Mt. 13:38) is a Hebrew idiom, even though it appears in the Greek New Testament. The expression "sons of..." begins in the Old Testament, where it refers to membership in a class, such as, the "sons of the prophets" (2 Kg. 2:3, 5, 7, 15, etc.). The idiom has nothing to do with physical descendants, but rather, it accentuates the character of those so described. As such, the idiom focuses on some quality or moral characteristic. The "sons of Belial" (Jg. 19:22) are characterized by evil. The "sons of light" Jn. 12:36) are characterized by perceptiveness. The "sons of the kingdom" are those whose moral character and patterns of behavior are aligned with Jesus' teachings on the kingdom.

Jesus emphasized the character of those belonging to the kingdom in his famous Sermon on the Mount—those who were poor in spirit, those who mourned, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peace-makers, and those persecuted for righteousness (Mt. 5:3-12). He concluded the sermon with the **Parable of the Two Builders** (Mt. 7:24-27; Lk. 6:47-49).

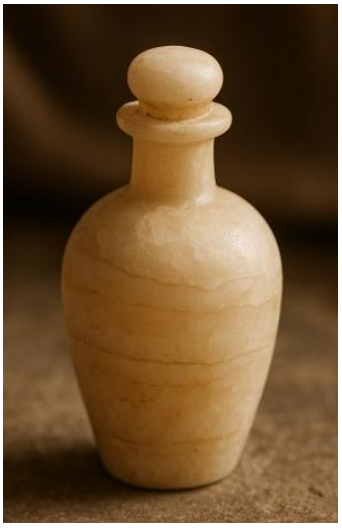
Houses, especially rural ones, were often built of mud brick, so the stability of the ground for the building site was critical. Most structures were built on the slopes of the hills rather than in the valleys, since all arable land was reserved for crops. The wise builder chose a building site on stable ground, preferably on rock. Only a fool would build a house in the sand of a wadi, since sudden cloudbursts in the rainy season could turn the dry beds into violent streams. The downpour provided the test! The torrent of water would quickly erode the sand from under a house built in a wadi, and the whole structure would collapse. A house built on a rock, on the other hand, would survive. The story of the two builders begs the question of who will survive the final test? Only the one who has built a life of obedience on Jesus' teachings! It is the one who hears Jesus' words and "puts them into practice" who is a true son of the kingdom.

The Palestinian wadi has a bed of dry sand. However, in the rainy season it can become a channel for flash floods.

Jesus emphasized obedience in the **Parable of Two Sons** (Mt. 21:28-32), one who

initially refused his father's instruction to work in the family vineyard but later changed his mind, and one who agreed to work but did nothing. Here, Jesus focused on the larger question of who is acceptable to God, a question that was usually answered along the lines of racial purity, Torah intensification, political alignment, or support for the temple. In this story Jesus underscored the truth that it was not those who claimed God's acceptance, but rather, those who actually did God's will who were acceptable. Despised outcasts, like prostitutes and tax-gathers, who responded to the ministry of John the Baptist in repentance (and by implication, those who responded to Jesus' ministry as well) were far ahead of the religious leaders who neither repented nor believed either John or Jesus!

In the **Parable of Two Debtors** (Lk. 7:36-50), Jesus addressed the inward cynicism of Simon the Pharisee and others of his ilk. To better understand the setting for this story, one should know that the wealthier village homes in Palestine were built around a courtyard, and in warmer weather, meals were taken there. All sorts of people were apt to wander in and out, some to beg food and others to listen to the wisdom of the learned. On one occasion, during the course of a meal with a Pharisee, while the guests were reclining in oriental fashion with their feet stretched behind them away from the table, a woman came in and stood behind Jesus, kneeling to wet his feet with her tears and, having no towel, wiping them dry with her hair. By letting down her hair, she was violating a well-known social protocol, since such a gesture was ordinarily reserved for one's husband.[1] She kissed his feet.[2] From a small alabaster flask of perfume, which women wore hanging around their necks on a thin cord, she then perfumed his feet. She had clearly heard the message of the freely-offered love of God to sinners, and her gratitude was deep and overwhelming. Simon the Pharisee was indignant. In his mind, he criticized Jesus for not knowing that the woman was a sinner (he seems to have known who she was), probably reckoning that she was a prostitute or perhaps the wife of a man with a despised trade, which rendered her unclean. If Jesus allowed her to touch him, then he himself would become unclean in a culture where ritual uncleanness, especially at meals, was strenuously avoided.



Alabaster, a fine-grained stone, was used in the ancient world as containers for precious ointments.

Jesus responded to Simon's cynicism with a story of two debtors, one who owed a considerable sum[3] and the other who owed a modest sum. Both had their debts cancelled. The parable is particularly lucid in its demonstration that the person who has experienced the greater forgiveness is the one who expresses the greater gratitude. Simon certainly had no gratitude. He had not even bestowed upon Jesus the customs appropriate for an honored guest—glaring omissions—and his callousness betrayed the poverty

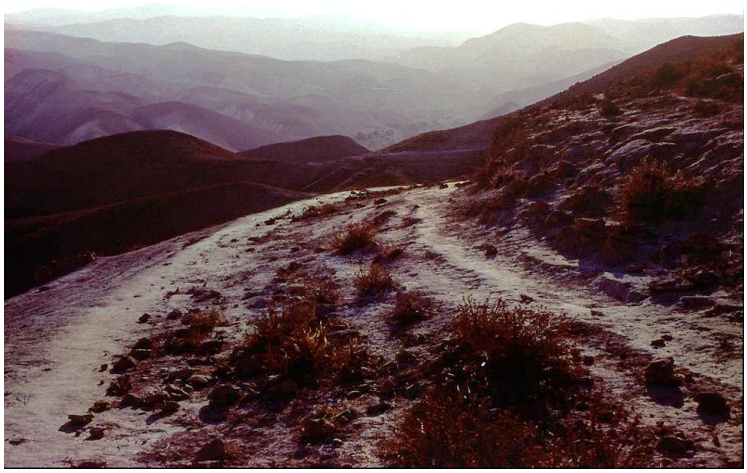
[1] The Talmud indicated that a woman could be divorced for letting down her hair in the presence of a man not her husband, cf. Tosefta *Sota* 59.

[2] Kissing the feet was a sign of the most heart-felt gratitude. The Talmud describes a man accused of murder kissing the feet of the scribe to whom he owed his acquittal and deliverance from death, cf. J. Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1966), p.99.

[3] A denarius is worth about a day's wages, so 500 denarii was worth a year and a half of work.

of his love. To the woman, Jesus spoke the astounding words, “Your sins are forgiven” (cf. 5:20), words that, like Jesus’ miracles, led to the fundamental question, “Who is this?”

Jesus illustrated the character of a true “son of the kingdom” in the **Parable of the Good Samaritan** (Lk. 10:29-37), a story in which a man was brutally attacked and left for dead on the isolated road between Jerusalem and Jericho that descends some 3300 feet in just 17 miles. An uninhabited, barren region, its peculiar dangers had earned it the nickname "the path of blood." On this road, the victim of the bandits was deliberately ignored by two Jewish holy men, but aided by a hated Samaritan. As is well known, a long-standing tension between Jews and Samaritans had created a mutual contempt. A century or so earlier, one Jewish leader, John Hyrcanus, had seized the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim and destroyed it. On another occasion, some Samaritans had strewn human bones in the sanctuary of the Jerusalem temple in the middle of the night to desecrate it.[4] It is this utter contempt of each group for the other that gives the parable its impact. Had Jesus had been speaking to Samaritans, he might well have told the story of the Good Jew, but since he was speaking to a Jewish theologian, who wished to justify himself with regard to the keeping of Torah, he made the hero a half-breed heretic. The expert in the law had asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responded that true life was to love God with a whole heart and one’s neighbor as oneself, what elsewhere Jesus regarded as the two most important commandments of the Torah (Mt. 22:34-40; cf. Dt. 6:5; Lv. 19:18). When the lawyer, in an attempt at self-justification, asked, “But who is my neighbor?” Jesus told this story. The man seemed not to know that only by a life of mercy could he inherit eternal life. He did not want to live by mercy; he wanted to live by his own ability to present himself righteous before God.



The ancient Roman road between Jerusalem and Jericho still survives, and in the 1st century it was notorious as the hideout of bandits. Most people who traveled this road did so in groups, not as single individuals.

In the story, the two holy men who ignored the victim likely did so to avoid ritual impurity. If he was a foreigner, he must not be touched, and since the man had been stripped, there were no identifying marks to reveal his ethnicity. If he was bleeding, his blood would be a contaminant. If he died, his corpse was even more so. There is also a marked progression of the three men. The priest “saw” the man and passed on down the road, the Levite “came to the place” and then passed on by. The Samaritan “came, saw, and took pity.” He cleaned and softened the man’s wounds with oil, disinfected them with wine, and bandaged them. Setting him on his own donkey, he took him to an inn, probably in Jericho, staying the night to watch over him. Even when leaving the next day, he promised to pay any additional expenses should any occur.

[4] Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.30.

At the end of the story, Jesus took the question of the Jewish lawyer and reversed it. The question, “Who is my neighbor?” is unanswerable, since true love does not operate with limitations but genuine compassion. Jesus leaves the question unanswered. However, he transformed the lawyer’s question as well. The lawyer wished to ask, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus turned it around into, "To whom am I a neighbor?" Every listener was compelled to answer!

To illustrate just how different from conventional wisdom would be the rewards to the sons of the kingdom when God claimed his rightful kingship, Jesus offered the **Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard** (Mt. 20:1-16). It begins with the familiar, “The kingdom of heaven is like…” A vineyard farmer summoned five groups of laborers to work his vineyard, but each group was hired at a different time of the day. The earliest group was promised a denarius, the common wage for a day’s work. The groups hired later—some nearly at the end of the day—were simply promised that they would be paid whatever was fair, and by conventional standards, it would have been expected that their remuneration would be prorated on the basis of their work hours, i.e., some fraction of a denarius.

Obviously, the vineyard owner must have been extremely pressed for time. It was nearly the end of the season. The vintage and the compressing had to be completed before the cool nights of the wet season began. At the end of the day, the farmer instructed his steward to pay the workers, beginning with those hired only an hour earlier. To each worker in all five groups the steward paid a single denarius. Clearly, the vineyard owner empathized with the unemployed and their families. When the group who had worked the whole day was finally paid, they complained that the ones who worked much less were paid the same. The farmer simply responded that they had received what he promised, and why should they complain if he was generous to the others?

In this story, Jesus demonstrated several important points about the kingdom. First, just as he had said to the disciples earlier, everyone who leaves what he values most to follow Jesus will inherit eternal life (cf. 19:29). It makes no difference whether a person serves his whole life or only responds in old age—the reward of eternal life for a true son of the kingdom will be the same. Second, God’s generosity in giving rewards is the behavior of kindness and sympathy, especially against a background of unemployment. God’s grace should not be denigrated when he dispenses it to those who seemingly have not earned it, for in his kingdom reward is not reckoned on the basis of merit. Third, there may also be a hint of the broadening of Jesus’ mission to non-Jews. If the people of Israel, who at least in one sense had been “hired” early on and had “endured the burden of the work and heat of the day” in their long history, they should not complain if Gentiles were invited to participate, even if “late” in coming. Jesus concluded once more with the equalizing statement, “So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Finally, in the **Parable of the Barren Fig Tree** (Lk. 13:6-9), Jesus emphasized that the people of God’s kingdom are expected to bear fruit. In the Middle East, vineyards and fruit trees are planted together. No figs were to be harvested for the first three years. In the fourth year, it was holy, and in the fifth year the fruit could be harvested (Lv. 19:23). After planting a fig tree which yielded no figs, it was now six years or more later, and the man decided to cut it down. His vinedresser, however, held out hope and advised waiting yet one more year for additional fertilization. This extension symbolized the crisis at hand. Six years was long enough to wait for fruit, while an additional year was surely undeserved. But this was the last chance; if the nation did not bear fruit, just as John the Baptizer had said, it would be cut down and destroyed.