

5) PARABLES FROM LUKE & MATTHEW

Luke 12. 13-21 The Parable of the Rich Fool

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' 14 But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' 15 And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' 16 Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17 And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" 18 Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." 20 But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" 21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

Luke 16. 1-13 The Parable of the Dishonest Manager

Then Jesus said to the disciples, 'There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. 2 So he summoned him and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer." 3 Then the manager said to himself, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. 4 I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes." 5 So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" 6 He answered, "A hundred jugs of olive oil." He said to him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty." 7 Then he asked another, "And how much do you owe?" He replied, "A hundred containers of wheat." He said to him, "Take your bill and make it eighty." 8 And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

10 'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. 11 If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 13 No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.'

Matthew 20. 1-16 The Labourers in the Vineyard

20 For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; ⁴and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" ⁷They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." ⁹When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." ¹³But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

Matthew 21. 23-32 The Authority of Jesus Questioned & The Parable of the Two Sons

23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' ²⁴Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" ²⁶But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' ²⁷So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

28 'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." ²⁹He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD DISRUPTS BUSINESS AS USUAL

Luke 12: 13-21 - The Rich Farmer

One of Jesus' favourite ways to express a person's inward motivations is through the use of a soliloquy (an inner dialogue), especially in the gospel of Luke. However, even though in several other parables (e.g. The Prodigal Son, the Dishonest Manager, the Unjust Judge) there is a turning point in the protagonist, there is no turning point in the Rich Farmer. This parable is also unique in that God directly addresses a character: "But God said to him, 'You Fool!'" ...

A number of parables we have already begun to study focus on being prepared for the coming of God or the coming of Christ again (e.g. The 10 Bridesmaids, The final Judgment, etc). This parable is in that category.

The context in which Jesus tells this parable is a dispute between brothers about a family inheritance. Money is a major source of conflict in families and among friends and neighbours. Jesus identifies the root of evil behind money as greed. And in order to teach about the futility of greed as a motivating basis for life's decisions with money, he tells the parable. Jesus lives in a world where there are many poor and few rich. It is also a world where the poor are dependent on the generosity of the rich to survive. Thus, there is a lot at stake in a person's attitude with their money.

The farmer in the parable does very well for himself. His wealth is in the form of a stockpile of crops and other items he has purchased by the sale of his crops. He also believes that happiness comes from security and comfort, and the more he has the more secure and comfortable he will feel. But he is highly mistaken to believe that security comes from wealth and possessions. For life and death are not dependent on material possessions, and the welfare of one's soul is imperiled by the accumulation of possessions. Instead of sharing his bounty the farmer's greed only focuses on greater capacity for storage. He has no conception of the poor Lazaruses outside his gates or Christ in the least of these.

The direct address by God indicates how foolish and flawed the farmer's thinking and actions are. He will die in his sleep, and all that he has stored will go to others. And he will come before God poorer than ever.

Greed is such that it can possess us. We become anxious when we feel we do not have enough. Sometimes even when we get more, we still feel deficient in goods and security. Sometimes it is grace upon grace to be stripped of our securities, in order to discover what's really important and how little we really need to be satisfied.

Luke 16: 1-13 - The Dishonest Manager

This is easily the most difficult parable of Jesus to comprehend in a positive manner. What it describes is the business dealings that took place typically in 1st century Palestine. There were landowners, managers, tenants, and merchants. Managers were typically well off because they had to be educated in order to handle a landowner's business.

On the surface, the manager comes off very badly on two fronts. First, charges are brought against him that he has been squandering (mismanaging, wasting) his boss's money and resources. Second, when he is fired, he acts dishonestly to save himself and cheats his boss again.

But if we look into the parable a little more deeply, maybe something else emerges. First of all, we are not told whether the accusations against him are valid. People accuse other people of wrongdoing all the time and we know business can sometimes be a cutthroat affair. What we are told is that his boss takes the side of the accusers and fires the manager. The manager on his part doesn't believe he can make a good case to save himself. Whatever the truth of the matter may be, if he wants to survive after he loses his job, his options are few.

Second of all, we don't know whether the reduction of the amount of billing the manager undertakes with his boss's debtors are cheating his boss. In the business of that time, the manager was free to charge any rate above the boss's cut as a profit for himself. Managers could become quite well-off this way. By cutting down the billing, he would certainly lose his cut of the profits, but the pay-off would be the kindness of the debtors to him once he is in need. "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you" may be the thinking here.

However, the problem is that the way the parable is presented to us, the manager's motive in reducing the bills of the debtors is self-interest, rather than the well-being of the debtors or their ability to pay their debts. The question for us is: does necessity breed virtue? Or is survival and shrewdness, which sometimes has an element of dishonesty to it, always opposite to virtue and goodness? It's funny how sometimes we only become sensitive to other people and what they go through, by going through hard times ourselves. If we look at this parable from the perspective of other parables about money, greed and possessions, we realize that this man's critical situation forces him to think differently towards others. He cannot afford to be oblivious to his relationships with others or his generosity, as he will need the generosity and kindness of others when he comes into need.

Vs 10-13 seems to reverse any notion that dishonesty can payoff in the end. If you cannot be trusted in little things, you cannot be trusted with things that really count. Faithfulness is faithfulness, and when it comes to money, serving God first means being honest with money, even to one's own detriment or loss of profit.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD DISRUPTS BUSINESS AS USUAL

Matthew 20: 1-16 - Labourers in the Vineyard

This is another one of those difficult to understand parables of Jesus. Part of the problem is that Jesus offers, at first, a typical 1st century Palestinian description of a landowner hiring workers to harvest grapes. Typically, there would be many people looking for work and the landowner would have no problem finding them. A denarius would be a typical daily wage for a worker. Also typical would be the fact that the landowner would keep hiring additional workers as needed to complete the harvest by day's end.

But Jesus also gives a twist to this typical scenario. The landowner pays everyone the same even though everyone hasn't worked the same number of hours. Is it a surprise that conflict follows? Is it a surprise that those who have worked the most hours don't think it's fair that they get no bonus as those who have worked less are getting paid the exact same amount?

Well, this twist challenges us, as it would challenge people listening to Jesus then, to search for the deeper meaning of the parable. If we think of the landowner as God or Jesus, and we think of the workers as people, what meaning do we find?

First of all, people either get to heaven or they don't. It doesn't matter how many good deeds they've done, how long they have been devoted to God, how deep their faith, how many people they've helped. There are no hierarchies of reward in heaven. You're either in or you're out. So, whenever the workers are hired, they are either hired or they're not. It doesn't matter how many hours they have worked in the end. And in terms of payment, it's all the same. It's either a denarius or it's nothing. These are the only options.

Secondly, this parable is about the grace of God. The emphasis is not on how long the workers have worked, but the fact that even close to the end of the day, the landowner is willing to hire workers and pay them their wage (always the same amount). There is always room in God's kingdom for the stragglers, for those who weren't at the right place at the right time in life to be welcomed into the kingdom in the first place.

Finally, Jesus is speaking to people in his own context. The religious people - Pharisees, etc. - are like the workers who have started early in the day. They have been raised and nurtured in the religious way and they obey the law of God very strictly. Those who are considered morally flawed - tax collectors, sinners of various kinds - are like those brought in toward the end of the day. Their lives have been broken and messed up, but in humility and repentance they are responding to Jesus' call. While the Pharisees would want them treated as second class citizens of God's kingdom, Jesus is embracing them as fully as any other citizen of the kingdom. This is the radical grace of God. "The last shall be first and the first shall be last." The Pharisees who are first, grumble at God's grace through Jesus, and their grumbling pushes them outside God's kingdom.

Those who were always outsiders, are now coming in and taking up the spaces vacated by the Pharisees. Of course, the Pharisees can come back in, but their time with Jesus is running out.

Matthew 21: 23-32 - The Two Sons

Here there is a parable sandwiched between an argument Jesus is having with the Pharisees about John the Baptist. The theme, however, is very much in line with the parable of the labourers in the vineyard.

The parable itself can be interpreted in different ways. It makes us uncomfortable, as it would have made people in Jesus' day uncomfortable. Neither of the two sons is perfect, even though the son who ends up doing what the father asks is better than the one who does not. But even the one who ends up doing the will of his father initially responds in the negative. The other son at least responds in the positive, even if he ends up not doing what he has said he would. Most of us have probably experienced both sons responses and actions in ourselves at different points. Maybe those of us with children, or those of us who have worked with children, will recognize different personalities and characters familiar to us in the two sons.

However, in the context of Jesus' argument with the chief priests and elders, the parable has a specific meaning. The son who says yes is like religious people. They have committed themselves to following the law of God in their personal and collective lives. Yet when someone like John the Baptist comes, who has not passed their test of authenticity (which includes recognizing their religiosity and authority as religious leaders) they reject him and close their hearts, even though the call of God to them is coming through him. Those who are morally and spiritually flawed - sinners of all kinds - have said no to God by the way they have lived their lives, but have now responded to John's call as from God. In the end, they are the ones to be blessed by God while the religious are being shut out.

In what ways do our hearts get hardened to what God may be calling us to open to?

For next week:

Matthew 22: 1-14, Luke 14: 15-24; Matthew 25: 14-28, Luke 19: 11-24.