

SECTION III



RESOURCES FOR PREACHING

CHAPTER ONE

Preaching Parables: A Five-Sermon Series

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Although ministers have preached on the parables of Jesus for hundreds of years, it is probably harder to do so today than it has ever been. Many of the parables are taken from rural or agricultural settings and may not seem to have a proper role in a scientific and urban age. Some people dismiss them as childish or “Sunday School” stories, unworthy of serious study by modern men and women. Nevertheless, some New Testament scholars see the renewed interest in the parables as one of most important biblical happenings in the past fifty years. Other than the Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer, the parables are among the best known and loved of the teachings of Jesus. The parables comprise more than a third of the teachings of Jesus. Scholars differ on the number of parables in the gospels. Some list as many as seventy; others list only thirty. A child was asked one day what was her favorite part of the Bible. “The like sayings,” she answered. Many of us would agree.

Parables were a familiar Jewish method of teaching. Numerous parables can be found in the Old Testament. Note especially 2 Samuel 12:1–4; 2 Kings 14:9; Isaiah 5:1–6 and 28:23–29; Jeremiah 1:11–13, 13:1–11, 13:12–14, 18:1–13, 19:1–5, and 24:1–10; and many others. How do we define a parable? A little girl said, “A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” That’s not bad. A parable is a picture image or narrative drawn from a familiar realm, such as nature or domestic life, to convey a spiritual truth. A parable may be a metaphor or simile or a word picture or a story designed to illuminate a

spiritual truth about life. Jesus drew his parables from home, farm, city streets, fields, weddings, children playing, baking, sewing, the marketplace, and other ordinary places of life.

The parable may begin in such a way that listeners feel that the speaker is addressing someone else and that they are at a safe distance; before they realize it, unexpectedly, they are drawn into the story and the pointer is directed their way. Rather than seeing the parables as simple stories with obvious moral teachings, readers and listeners have been invited to enter a picture gallery and see themselves in the mirrors within and respond to the personal summons that each solicits from its participants.

PREPARING TO PREACH PARABLES

Someone has said that the saxophone is a musical instrument that is easy to play poorly. The same can be said for preaching on parables. Often preachers think a parable has an obvious meaning and requires no study, research, or preparation before they preach on it. That is a mistake. Let me offer ten suggestions for you to consider as you prepare to preach on the parables.

1. Before you preach on a parable, carefully study the context of the parable in the text, the central theme of the parable, and Jesus' intent. The background and circumstances surrounding the telling of a particular parable are essential to knowing its meaning.
2. Remember that a parable is not an allegory; you should not try to find fantastic meanings in the images or characters in the parables. This was the method often used in the first several centuries of Christianity by such persons as Marcion, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and even Augustine. The one parable that may be an exception to this rule and have some allegorical features is the parable of the wicked tenants in Mark 12:1–12.
3. Avoid a superficial approach in your interpretation. Simply making a running exposition or commentary on a parable without any sense of its basic theme or message will not be helpful. A discussion of this sort without any reference to the plan, purpose, or central meaning of the parable would be ludicrous. That's the reason careful research and exegesis are essential.
4. Seek to discover the central teaching of the parable. Investigate the parable to determine what is the most urgent and essential kernel of truth. Don't

waste all your time on minor details that keep you so busy or distracted that you never focus on the central thrust of the parable. Some preachers make the mistake of trying to find some significance in every detail in the parable. That may lead you on a side street and take you away from the main highway. You, of course, may have minor movements in the sermon, but your aim with them is to lead back to the central theme. The central theme of most of the parables focuses on the Kingdom of God and the nature or characteristics of one who is a part of that Kingdom.

5. Once you discover the central theme of the parable, don't turn the sermon into a trite moral on that truth. Jesus' parables are not simple stories conveying simple moral truths about life. In the parable of the talents, for example, don't reduce the parable to a moral like "faithfulness is all God demands of us." Moral and ethical teachings clearly are taught in many of the parables, but you should avoid reducing any parable to a predetermined moralizing.

6. Remember that no one parable will contain the entire Christian message or a complete summary of Christian faith. A particular parable may teach only one facet or dimension of the Christian message. One may focus on love, another on judgment, another on hope, another on forgiveness, another on faithfulness, and so on. The parable of the prodigal son may teach about forgiveness but not about faithfulness or judgment. Other teachings of Jesus will have to be considered to determine those themes.

7. Keep an eye out for humor. Sometimes we may miss the teaching in a parable because we do not recognize that Jesus was using humor. Elton Trueblood found at least thirty parables of Jesus that he said used humor to communicate the message. Some of the parables may have been poking fun or making light of religious leaders or using humor to help the listener sense the meaning of the story without being totally offended.

8. To interpret a parable in our contemporary setting, determine what the text meant originally in its day. Strive to understand the original meaning of the text—what it meant in its day to the hearers of Jesus—before preaching about what it means for our day.

9. Once you have discovered the basic truth Jesus intended for a parable in his day, determine how you will communicate that same truth in a way that will be clear, understandable, and applicable to the contemporary world today. You have to discern what the text meant and what it continues to mean for us today.

10. Try to discover the surprising or unexpected lesson that Jesus was often trying to communicate in his parables. Many listeners would be startled to discover how refreshing the teachings of Jesus are when seen in this way. Jesus' imagery hangs in listeners' minds and startles them with its freshness or vitality. This approach tries to bring listeners to see through the window of the parable how the truth applies to them. Our preaching should try to preach the "teaching event" to enable listeners to experience in our day what the original listeners may have felt in their day. The words of preaching strive to cause a happening again.

The parables, to use Helmut Thielicke's phrase, are God's "picturebook."¹ These stories open the mind and heart and enable listeners to grasp Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God and its relationship to life. These ancient stories are still as modern as today's newspaper or the Internet. Contemporary hearers can still see themselves in the "picturebook" when they are invited to enter the stories and discover the truth God has for them within. My prayer is that the modern preacher will proclaim them in a way that keeps that invitation open to the listeners.

THE PARABLE OF THE DISHONEST MANAGER

TOPIC: Lessons from a Dishonest Man

TEXT: Luke 16:1–13

What a rogue the man was whom Jesus praised in his parable. I am sure that as the disciples heard that story, they were aghast. When Jesus was first telling the story, they were probably waiting for the moral that he would drive home, such as "Now let me tell you how not to be like that guy." But Jesus surprised them by praising the man's shrewdness. There is no question that the man was a crook. And I think Jesus knew exactly what he was trying to do with that story.

We do not always know what to do with this parable. In fact, some have found the story so difficult, confusing, and embarrassing that they have used it as evidence to demonstrate that the Christian faith really is unworthy of belief. It was a daring, imaginative attempt to use a very unlikely person as a hero.

¹Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father* (New York: HarperCollins, 1959), p. 11.

Look at the story. Here is a Jewish man who knows it is against the law of his own nation to collect interest. Because it is against his own laws and tradition, he will not do that. He hires a Gentile manager to do this task for him. As custom was in the Eastern tradition, there was a certain rental fee, but everybody knew that one had to pay bribes under the table. The boss realized that if the manager got too greedy and the renters felt they were being overcharged, or if the manager had to dip into the master's storehouse and take some of his grain to deal with these guys, then the boss would not only be losing goods but also damaging his reputation. If this happened, he knew he would have to dismiss the manager because the manager was not only doing a poor job but also hurting the boss's reputation.

What does this manager do now that he will lose his job? Jesus lets us inside the manager's mind, and we overhear his conversation with himself. He seems to know the limits he could go with the renters. He brought his owner an exact statement from the renters. Now he had in a written form what the renters' debts were. All of this was done to gain the favor of these renters whom he hoped would help him later. When his boss found out what he had done, the boss praised the steward for his ability to be resourceful. That is where the problem hits us clearly today. Jesus praised this guy for being a shrewd crook. I do not think for a second that Jesus told this story to teach us to be dishonest. I believe he was trying to tell his disciples that we can learn some great truths about how to live in the world, even from people who are dishonest. What are we to make of this story? I would suggest several things.

- I. **The first lesson we can learn is that to be a Christian is to be resourceful. Christians, who are contrasted with the children of darkness, are often much less resourceful than unbelievers.** We admire resourceful crooks we see in movies or television shows. The TV series and movie *The Fugitive* focused on a man who spent part of his life running from and evading the law. He was shrewd. The movie *The Dirty Dozen* was about some men taken from prison and utilized by the U.S. military to carry out a dangerous mission. In *The Sting*, with Paul Newman and Robert Redford, several crooks pull a twist on some other crooks in an intriguing story. Viewers were continuously amused on *MASH* when Hawkeye fooled the supply sergeant out of a box of medicine, a jeep, or something else. We often do not use our resources to enable Christianity to have an effect on society. We need to let God work in

and through us so that we may be more useful for him with the resources we have.

- II. **Second, notice that this man is praised because he looked ahead.** Moffat does not translate the passage as “he used it wisely” but as “he planned ahead.” Christians need to look ahead and learn from the world how to be better and more effective Christians. To try to operate a church in an unbusinesslike fashion or to carry out church work without order or discipline ends in chaos. We do not model the world’s ethical standards and images, but we can learn from them efficiency in all we do. In our struggle to understand the Christian life, clarity comes with a definite goal before us. Christ pulls us toward that goal to be his people on mission in the world.

Businesses pour millions of dollars into research so that they can plan ahead. They want to anticipate customers’ needs and wants. Research, preparation, and imagination are used in almost every area of life, and these qualities need to be in the Church in our preparation and employment of ministry. The Church should use the best minds that we can find to see how we can serve Christ today and in the future. As Christians who live in today’s world, we draw upon resources from wherever we find them and use them in the service of Christ. We do not bring the world’s standards into the Church and simply copy them. But we learn from the world, and use the power of Christ to enable us to follow his wish, desire, and goal in using these contemporary resources.

- III. **Third, I think Jesus is also telling us in this parable that we need to get our values right.** Here is a man who, when he got in a crunch in his life, saw that the most important thing to him was not money but friends. “Make friends by use of your material possessions.” He attempted then to use his ability with money to increase his friendships. Jesus teaches us through this parable to learn to develop friendships through the use of our financial resources. This manager, of course, was concerned with a selfish end. I do not think Jesus is trying to tell us to use our financial resources selfishly. He used the phrase “how much more.” This dishonest man used his opportunity selfishly, but Jesus goes on to say “how much more” Christians should use our material resources for better ends. There is an old saying that states it this way: “What earthly good are you doing for heaven’s sake?”

Some of us need to ask, “What good do our wealth and possessions do us? Am I seeking to use whatever material possessions I have so they can benefit and serve other people?” This approach builds for us genuine friendships. As we learn to use whatever resources we have to meet the needs of others around us, the astonishing thing is that we will draw them to us as friends. That is not our intent, but it is the result. Material possessions are not an end—they are a means.

- IV. **This leads me to a fourth lesson in this parable. Jesus says that if this dishonest man has done this act for the wrong reason, “how much more” should we learn the significance of little deeds in serving God.** “If you are trustworthy in a little, you will be trustworthy in much.” Think of the importance of a coin, a gift, a handshake, a smile, a thought, a concern, an embrace, a few moments of time, a telephone call, or a note. The little things we do indicate something about us in how we handle the big things of life. We need to learn to use the small opportunities to hear how God is expecting us to draw upon them to grow in our lives.

What you do in your Sunday School class; what you do through youth work; what you do as you care for your children week by week; a visit to a homebound person, a sick person in a nursing home; what you do as you sing in the choir; what service you render as an usher; what you do as you count the money; what you do in hundreds of ways in this church and community may seem to some people to be small things, but they are giant things in the sight of God. The little services you render are indications of what you are really like inside.

Jesus is telling us that the smallest things we do in our lives sometimes can make an unbelievable impact for good or evil. Jesus reminds us that we can learn even from dishonest people to be more resourceful, we can learn to look ahead, and we can learn to discover the value of using money correctly for higher ends than merely physical ones. How much more should we learn to be more resourceful than the children of darkness because we belong to the children of light.

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

TOPIC: Making an Investment in Life

TEXT: Matt. 25:14–30

When Jesus told the parable of the talents, it had a familiar ring in the Eastern world. Although poor people did not have much money to invest, the wealthy could invest their money with moneylenders who would pay interest on it. Jesus' listeners were aware that this kind of transaction happened, at least among the wealthy.

A talent in ancient times was originally a weight of measurement. Its worth depended on the kind of coin, whether it was copper, silver, or gold. The likely value of one talent today would be a thousand dollars. In the ancient world, a thousand dollars was equivalent to twenty years of wages for a laboring man. Two talents would, of course, be seen as much more. And five talents would be such wealth that a poor man would think that he could never obtain that amount in a lifetime.

The word *talent* has come into the English language through this parable. Unfortunately, we think of talents primarily as innate abilities, such as the ability to sing, play a musical instrument, or perform in athletics. That was really not the original intent of this story when Jesus told it. This was a parable, as were several others in this series, on the last judgment. The reference to talent focused on whether or not an individual had used wisely the opportunities and sacred gifts that God had entrusted to him or her. Think of your talent as the sacred gift with which God has endowed you personally. What are you going to do with that trust?

I. Notice that none of these persons had equal gifts. One had received a talent of a thousand dollars, another two, and another five. What a tremendous reflection on the reality of life! The Constitution of our country and the Declaration of Independence assert that all persons should have equal rights, but that does not make us equal in gifts. Anybody can walk in a room filled with people, look around, and see the diversity of gifts that are there. Anyone who has ever sat in a classroom can perceive the differing intellectual gifts. One individual in the class may make all the rest of us look rather mediocre. Whereas we have to study the subject again and again, that individual grasps it in a moment and never cracks a book. Intellectually that person is far superior to us. We have differing gifts of intelligence, physical ability, opportunities, tastes, advantages, initiative, and so on.

II. Notice, also, that the challenge given to all the servants was to be faithful.

The master did not say that they had to be successful, to become famous or rich. What God requires of us regarding our gifts is faithfulness. Many long for greater or different opportunities of service. Why should you be surprised that other opportunities have not come your way when you have not been faithful in using the gifts or opportunities you presently have? Begin where you are.

1. Observe what their reward was. The two servants who were faithful were thanked by their master and given other opportunities for service. “You have proved trustworthy in a small way; I will now put you in charge of something big. Come and share your master’s delight” (NEB). Faithfulness in a small matter opens the door for greater service.
2. This parable also notes that the master commended both of the servants who were faithful. In verses 21 and 23 is an identical statement. “Well done, you good and faithful servant.” One servant had taken his five talents and multiplied them, and the other had done the same with his. Both received the same praise. Those who serve Christ faithfully minister equally before God and receive praise from God for that service.
3. Note that the reward that each received was to share in the joy of the Lord. “Enter into the joy of your master.” God has not promised us wealth, prestige, fame, or fortune. God has promised us his *joy*, which no one can take away from us.

III. The major thrust of this parable focuses on the man with one talent. He is the one in the story who received condemnation from his master. Why?

1. One reason was that he did not understand the character of his master. “You are a harsh person. You reap where you haven’t sown.” I am convinced that a lot of people act the way they do simply because they do not understand the character of God. There are some who envision God as a kind of benign, sweet old grandfather or as vindictive and judgmental. Jesus revealed that his Father was a God of love and grace. Rather than wanting to abuse us, God seeks to draw us to himself and share his love with us.
2. Unfortunately, like this servant, many sometimes misunderstand the character of God. This misunderstanding is often reflected in some of

the expressions we use concerning the will of God. Illness may come into your life, or you lose a loved one, and you may say, "Well, we just have to accept God's will." What does that expression say about our understanding of the character of God?

3. The man with one talent received a harsh rebuke from his master because he did nothing. The servant was called a rascal not because he was selfish or had been a thief or had engaged in some kind of criminal activity. Whenever someone buries his gift, he loses it. When a talent is buried, it is wasted. He was called an "idle servant." He proved himself untrustworthy. Too often Christians, in the face of evil, suffering, pain, or the many needs around us, do nothing. Our Lord said that words of praise would be given those who gave a cup of cold water, visited individuals in prison, and helped the sick in his name. His harshest words of rebuke were for those who saw human needs around them and did nothing.
4. The servant lost his talent because he did not use it. "Take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents." If you do not use your gifts, you lose them. It is a simple fact of life. If you do not use your muscles by exercising them, they become weaker. If you don't use your mind, then your thinking powers are not stretched and developed. You may have been able to play the piano very well at a young age, but if you do not continue practicing, you will lose that gift. The same is true with any instrument. Continual practice is essential. You may have learned Spanish or some other language when you were young, but if you have not continued to use it, you will lose your ability to read or speak it. Use it or lose it. It is a reality of life.
5. The servant did not use his talent, but buried it in the ground because he was afraid. There are many things we do not do in life out of fear. We are afraid that we will be misunderstood or that we might fail, be ridiculed or ignored. We are afraid, so in consequence we do nothing. But Jesus has called us to use our gifts in an adventurous way. The Christian needs to take risks in life and step forward in faith.

IV. The man who buried his talent reflects many of us. Most of us are ordinary people with average gifts. Many of us feel we have lesser gifts than others. But remember, we all have some gift. God has endowed all of us with some gift.

Unfortunately, too many persons are afraid, bury their talent, and do nothing. Many make no attempt to serve in church, share a word of love about Christ with someone else, invite someone to attend church, encourage somebody who is down, or do anything to help others. They simply do nothing.

Your presence, your gifts are essential in the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is not advanced by a few super-talented individuals. It needs you. It needs all of us. Each one of us is challenged to give his or her gifts to God. Too often we don't think one person makes any difference, so we say, "Why should I get involved?" Sometimes one person can make a lot of difference. Your presence and your use of your gifts are important. Don't bury your talent in the ground. Jesus can use all talents, large or small, in his Kingdom. Look at the disciples Jesus chose. They were not greatly multi-talented individuals by the world's standards. He chose his disciples from fishermen and tax collectors, ordinary persons. But they gave their gifts to him—and he blessed them. And so must we!

THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

TOPIC: Standing Up for Kindness

TEXT: Luke 10:25–37

In response to a lawyer's question, Jesus told a parable about a man who traveled from Jerusalem down the Jericho Road and was attacked by robbers and left bleeding and dying. Along this same road came a priest and a Levite. They passed on the other side. The Good Samaritan came along and gave the man assistance. This story describes at least three attitudes toward life.

I. The first attitude is "*I'll take from others.*" This is the attitude of the robber. "I will take whatever I want. It doesn't make any difference who has it." The road from Jerusalem to Jericho descends thirty-five hundred feet in its twenty-two miles through rough terrain. Robbers would often hide behind rocks and in the wadis along the way. This road has been called the Bloody Way.

You and I know the robbers of life. They declare in veiled ways, "I will take whatever I want from you. It doesn't make any difference how it affects you or how it hurts you." You are simply a means to an end for them. They

manipulate, abuse, and use people; cheat, steal, or lie. This is a philosophy we see too often in life. In the parable, the robbers beat the man and left him for dead. Many of those who inflict pain are unconcerned about their actions.

- II. A second attitude toward life reflected in this parable is “*I will ignore others.*” This is seen in the response of the priest and the Levite. Some scholars believe that the priest may have been going toward the temple to perform his religious duties. A priest worked in his official priestly duties in the temple only about two weeks a year. If the priest were traveling toward the temple to do his two-week tour of duty there, he knew that he could be defiled if he touched this man who was lying by the road and discovered that he was dead. It might keep him from performing his sacred functions.

But from a careful reading of the text, I am not so sure that he was going toward Jerusalem. The text states that he was “going down” from Jerusalem. I think he had already done his priestly duty and was simply rushing home to be with his family and did not want to take the time to be bothered with this man.

The Levite was a holy person by heredity. He and the priest passed on the other side. They were too busy; they had too much to do. They thought that religion was more concerned with custom than with charity, with being than with doing, with seeing than with assisting, with feeling than with helping.

The priest represents the noble citizens, the good folks in society, the churchgoing people, and the preachers. He probably told the man who was lying wounded in the ditch, “Friend, I am concerned about you. I want you to know that I hurt with you. I ache with you. I am sorry this has happened to you. As soon as I get home, I will organize a committee, and we will start a drive to clean up the Jericho Road.” Oh, he had noble feelings and good thoughts toward this man. He may have even told him, “I will inform the Jerusalem Red Cross.” “I will let the Jericho Salvation Army know of your plight.” He was too busy with his own needs, concerns, family, and way of life. He was concerned, but he didn’t do anything. He simply ignored him.

- III. There was a third attitude in this story. It is expressed in the words, “*I’ll help others.*” Notice what an unlikely hero Jesus set before his listeners.

A Samaritan! This was a despised person to the Jewish mind. This attitude of hatred toward the Samaritans had existed for 450 years. They were considered half-breeds, a defiled people. When Jesus made the Samaritan a hero, the hair probably stood up on the back of the necks of his Jewish hearers. The Jews despised the Samaritans so much that they would take a day's journey longer to go another way rather than go through Samaria.

Jesus said the Samaritan came that way "by chance." The word in Greek is better stated "coincidence," meaning that God was involved in the process of bringing the Samaritan near the certain injured man. Seeing the man's need, the Samaritan showed mercy. Mercy means "moving toward." He extended himself toward the wounded man in a deliberate act.

Notice the personal involvement of the Good Samaritan in this situation. He went down into the ravine or desert area where the man was lying hurt and maybe unconscious. He touched him physically and began to bind up his wounds by pouring oil on them to cleanse the cuts. He put himself at some personal risk by going to the side of the hurt stranger. He didn't know if the man was really hurt or was lying there only to entrap him. He also did not know whether this man had some kind of disease that he might catch. He exposed himself to some potential danger.

He placed the hurt man on his animal and then took him to an inn. The owner of the inn obviously knew the Samaritan. The Samaritan may have been a businessman who traveled that way often and frequently spent the night at this inn. "Take care of him," the Samaritan said, "and I will repay you any other costs he may run up on his bill." His repeated use of the personal pronoun "I" indicate that the innkeeper knows him. He was saying in effect, "You know me. I will repay you."

The Samaritan also made personal sacrifices to assist the wounded man. He sacrificed his time, changed his schedule, and may have missed the next caravan going East and even lost a few sales.

The Samaritan also took the risk of being misunderstood by his Jewish neighbor. The fact that a Samaritan rescued a Jew might not sit well with the Jew who was rescued. He and his family might think that the Samaritan had defiled him by touching him. The Samaritan was so despised by the Jews that some might have assumed that he had attacked the wounded man. The family of the victim might seek revenge on him.

When telling this story, Jesus then turned to the lawyer and asked, “Who do you think then was the neighbor?” Notice that the lawyer cannot even say the word Samaritan. He says, “The one who showed mercy.”

IV. *Who is your neighbor? That is your question and mine today.* Where do you see yourself in this story? Are you the victim? Are you wounded and hurting, waiting for somebody to come and tend your needs? Are you the robber or the priest? Or are you the one who shows kindness? As the story unfolds, we are actors in the drama, not merely observers.

To ask the question, “Who is my neighbor?” is the wrong question. That very question attempts to set limits. We are not to restrict who our neighbor is. To know who our neighbor is moves us beyond geography, countries, or space. To know our neighbor is not a concern for an area but with a spirit. Our neighbor is determined not by proximity but by need. Our neighbor is not identifiable by fences but in opportunities for ministry. Our neighbor cannot be defined. There is an absence of limits. When we understand what it means to be a neighbor, we realize that all fences and walls are destroyed. All barriers disappear. All limitations are removed. We are neighbors to persons of all races, creeds, skin colors, ranks, geographical areas, or educational levels. God expects us to reach out to all human beings with love and compassion. Wherever there is need, we are challenged to respond in kindness and grace.

The Good Samaritan is symbolic of Jesus Christ and his ministry. Jesus’ ministry is summarized in the compassion of the Samaritan. Jesus spent his ministry reaching out to persons in need—to the blind, the deaf, the crippled, the lepers, the outcast, and the lost. He reached out with compassion to all persons in their time of need.

The Jericho Road passes by your door every day. Its path may lead by the door at your home, at work, or on the street you travel each day. Down the Jericho Road that passes your door, you encounter the hurting, the lonely, the wounded, and the needy that walk by every day. They reach out to you for help. Do you see them and hear them? Who is your neighbor? That is not the right question. The right question is: “To whom am I neighbor?” Our neighbor is everyone who has need.

THE PARABLES OF THE PATCH AND NEW WINESKINS

TOPIC: The Challenge of the New

TEXT: Luke 5:36–39

Mark's gospel tells us that it was John the Baptist's disciples who began to ask Jesus the question, "Why do you break our traditions?" Matthew's gospel records that it was Jesus' disciples themselves who asked him. In Luke's account, the Pharisees are the ones who asked him this question. Most likely, at one time or another, all of them asked Jesus why he had broken their traditions.

Jesus responded to this question, as he often did, with parables. One parable was simply about a patch on a coat. This probably indicates the poor background of the home life of Jesus. He, like many of us, grew up watching his mother put patches on garments and understood that kind of story. The other parable about the wineskin was also a familiar picture. The Palestinians did not use glass bottles to store wine, and plastic bottles had not been invented. They used the skins of animals. In the two parables, Jesus describes the nature of religion, which he had come to place in our hearts.

I. One of the lessons we can learn from these parables is that too often we want to cling to the old and familiar, and will not give way to the new. We all often prefer the old, familiar pathways. We like the old haunts and familiar vacation spots. We enjoy the restaurants we have been to that are tried and true. We all somehow or another like, desire, and want the old familiar places.

We prefer the familiar and secure rather than the unknown. But Jesus is telling us that this is not the kind of religion he is seeking to initiate. His religion comes as a disturbing force in the world. It is often revolutionary in its impact on our lives. It comes as a mighty disturbance to the status quo.

The children of Israel believed that they were God's chosen people, and they wanted to hold on to the past and their traditions. God's blessing was not something they were just to keep for themselves. They had tended to build a fence around their beliefs and their traditions. They had attempted to make their religion a closed system, and others were excluded. They began to teach that only those who were Jews could be the children of God.

Jesus challenged the legal system that the scribes and Pharisees had built and declared that they had chosen not the weightier part of the law but the least essential, and had lost that which was most important.

II. Second, Jesus also tells us in these two parables that we need to be flexible.

In Palestine, wine was put in the skins of some animals, such as goats. Then the skin was covered with pitch, and the neck was secured so that the wine would not spill out. As the wine fermented, a new and therefore flexible skin would expand. The new skin could stand the strain caused by the wine. If someone attempted to put new wine into an old skin that had become dry, as the wine began to ferment and expand, it would burst the skin, and the wine would be lost. Jesus is saying that his gospel is the new wine. It could not be contained in the old skins of Judaism. He did not advocate that if one wanted to become a Christian, he or she must first become a Jew. His gospel exploded that old wineskin.

Down through the centuries, the gospel has continued to shatter old wineskins. It burst the wineskin of slavery and declared that all people before God are free people. It burst the wineskin of segregation and declared that all people before God are one. His gospel continues to burst old wineskins that linger with us. This gospel will burst the wineskins that are trying to contain the rights of women today. It will one day burst that old wineskin so that women can have more freedom and equality with men in our day. It will burst the old wineskins of religious dogmatism. It will break the old wineskins of provincial religion. It will break the old wineskins that try to limit our understanding of God to ancient Greek metaphysical systems. It is breaking the old wineskins that try to contain the way we speak about God or to God in some ancient language like that used in the King James Version.

God is bursting these old wineskins and coming to us with the freshness, newness, and vitality of the Divine presence. God is always the Creator, and God is still seeking to create us anew as individuals, as God's people, and as a church. God is always calling us to become more than we are. No old skins can ever contain the freshness of God's Spirit as it pervades our lives. Faith is always dynamic, not static.

Down through the centuries, many scientific and medical discoveries have been opposed by some members of society. When the automobile first

began to come down the road, people laughed and joked about that noisy contraption. Following the airplane's first flight, people ridiculed the Wright Brothers' efforts and thought that they would not amount to anything. Few papers thought that first flight important enough to carry an article on the event. Today you and I see the progress that has been made in many areas, and every single one of us in some way or another utilizes these scientific advances and discoveries.

III. Third, Jesus is also telling us in this parable that the gospel is a gospel of joy. He responded in these parables to the criticism that some had directed against him when they accused him of drinking and eating too much with his friends. "Why are you not more respectful in your religious practice?" "Why are you not more serious?" they seemed to ask. Jesus used the analogy of the bridegroom to tell them that while the bridegroom is present, rejoicing and feasting are the order of the day. The wine of his presence has burst the old wineskins and has given joy and invigoration. His gospel is volatile. It explodes old systems. It comes to us with a freshness, which is filled with joy and hope.

It is good news, and the good news is that we do not have to remain as we are. God is constantly coming into our lives to reveal to us the possibility of newness for us as individuals and as a church. We do not have to remain in depression or loneliness or sin or frustration or anger or indecisiveness as individuals. We do not have to remain divided with another or in controversy with other people. We can find the freshness of God's Spirit, which brings God's love and grace into our lives, and transform us to experience anew the joy of God's presence.

Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly." "I have come that your joy might be made full." Jesus said, "I have not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it." He fills it full with meaning. He has come to keep that which in the law is worth preserving. In the Shema we read that "the Lord our God is one." Jesus attempted to preserve that which was old and worthy of saving.

God admonishes us to lift our vision to what we can become as God's people. There are always those who want to build fences around our visions and look down or look back. But God is calling us to look ahead—to look forward at what we can be. The gospel we received from Jesus is always

fresh, new, and vital. Jesus challenges us to lift our wings and fly into new realms of service and creativity.

Jesus is giving you an opportunity to decide. Do you want your religion merely to be a patch on an old religious garment of your own design, or will you be open to the radically new grace he offers? Are you going to close your mind to God and assume you have already learned all you can from him, or will you remain open and responsive to God however God comes into your life? Will you settle for religious tradition and clichés instead of a real, vital, and joyous faith? Why settle for the stale and mundane when Christ offers you new life and radiant joy? The choice is yours.

I hope that we shall choose to be open to God and not be old wineskins. Jesus has already told us what happens to the old wineskins—they are burst asunder by the new wine. Let's be open to him and the direction that he is seeking to take us. His call is to go forward. The choice is yours.

THE PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

TOPIC: When Going to Church Doesn't Mean Much

TEXT: Luke 18:9–14

The listeners sat in stunned silence as Jesus finished this parable. They did not understand it. It was a complete reversal of everything they had believed. The Pharisee, the righteous one, was condemned by another religious leader. The publican, the one they saw as chief among sinners, was praised. They simply did not understand this story.

- I. **The Pharisee has received a lot of bad press in the New Testament.** He is condemned repeatedly. But the Pharisees were some of the finest, most respected and devout men in their community. They prayed at set times several times a day. They fasted not just occasionally but twice a week. Rather than a heavy man as he has often been depicted, the Pharisee would be lean and trim from his times of fasting. He was a man of self-discipline.

1. The Pharisee was a truly moral person, and you could take him at his word. He was a man who was devoted to his family. There was never any scandal that surrounded his life. He also was generous with his money and well respected in the community. He not only gave to the temple what the law required but went far beyond that. There were some items that Moses had restricted from the tithe. But he tithed everything.

2. Look at the prayer of the Pharisee. He was depicted as a tragic figure in this parable. He probably went up to the temple on a special holy day, maybe the Day of Atonement. As he prays, he notices the publican, and he puts as much distance between himself and the publican as he can. The word *Pharisee* means “the separated one.” He avoided contact with others because he might accidentally brush against someone like the publican and be unclean for weeks.

The Pharisee’s prayer is a “holy telegram” to God. His prayer reveals one who is enamored with himself. The focus is primarily about what he has done. “If there are only two holy men, my son and I are those two. If there is only one, I am he.” This Pharisee obviously felt that way. In his prayer, the Pharisee talks about himself and what he has done to pile up good works before God. His conceit is overwhelming. Here this Pharisee exposes himself fully. Instead of looking through a window that opens into God, he looks into a mirror and sees only a reflection of himself.

II. The Pharisee is a tragic figure because he thought he could make God indebted to him and force God to do something for him in return. “I have tithed,” he said. “I have done certain things; therefore, God is in my debt.” But is the Pharisee a stranger to us? I hear conversations like that almost daily: “Why did this happen to me? I do not understand it. I attend church regularly. I pray. I read my Bible. I give to the church. Why did my husband get sick?” Do you hear what is being said? I have done this; therefore, God is supposed to protect me.

1. The Pharisee, even in church, was very irreligious, and he never knew it. He thought he was close to God, yet he was very far from God. Many of us go through life that way. All of life revolves around “me”—my needs, my wishes, my desires, my goals, my aims, my satisfaction, my drives, and my intents. And it is clearly seen when people assert their self-righteousness. They are proud of their own goodness.

2. The Pharisee compares himself with others, and he points to the publican—the tax collector—in particular and declares, “I am not like other men who are extortionists, robbers, and adulterers. I am better than they are. I am certainly not like this publican.” Comparisons can always be easy, can’t they? I can appear very righteous compared to somebody else. If I set my own standard, what a good person I can declare myself to be! Look at the Pharisee again. He was not guilty of any gross sin, but he was guilty of the most basic sin, which is pride. He says, “I am not like that publican.” But he was also not much like God. We can be irreligious in church, and we can be serving God for the wrong reasons. Our motives will not always be correct.

III. There are times when going to church doesn’t mean much Not everything that is done in the name of religion is good. The Reformation was a protest against the indulgences that the Church sold to cleanse persons from their sins. Sometimes the method that the pope employed to raise money for his building programs was wrong. There are some people who want to give to the Church for the wrong reasons—to get a deduction on their income tax. They are not concerned about the Church, God, or religion. It is certainly all right to take your contribution to your church as a deduction on your income tax. But that should not be your reason for giving. Sometimes we can give for the wrong reasons. Our motives sometimes become confused.

1. We have to be honest and acknowledge that there are times when going to church doesn’t mean much. Some go to church and won’t speak to another. They gossip and spread lies behind another’s back. They sit through church and then go out into the world and live an immoral and dishonest life. Being in church will not automatically make us clean. We may leave with dirty minds and hearts. We may come to church and leave with self still on the throne instead of God. We need to open ourselves to God and be cleansed by God’s forgiving grace. If not, going to church doesn’t mean much.

2. Look at the publican’s prayer. The publican was not a well-liked person. He was considered by many Jews as the chief of sinners. He was working for the Roman government by collecting taxes from his own people, and skimmed off the top whatever he could for himself. To the Jewish people, he was a traitor. He had become wealthy and fat off the money he got

from his own people. He was seen as unclean by them because of his dealings with the Roman government. No Jew would go into his home.

3. The publican lifted his voice to God and confessed his sin. He was deeply convicted of his sin. He realized that he had hurt people, robbed them, and taken advantage of them. His gestures and prayers indicated his deep feelings of anguish. He beat upon his breast as a sign of his deep distress. There is no reference in the Old Testament to persons beating on their breasts like that. Usually this gesture was done by women. The publican is in such anguish of soul that he beats on his heart that is breaking out of an awareness of his own sinfulness and his deep sense of guilt.

The tax collector has gone up to worship on the Day of Atonement. The cymbal sounds, the trumpets blast, the choir of the Levites sing, and the smoke of the incense rises into the air. As the atoning sacrifice is being made, he cries out, "Let this atonement be for me, a sinner." That is the real meaning of his words, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." "Let this act of atonement apply to me. Let me be forgiven." Here is a humble man's cry for mercy.

4. Jesus says this man, rather than the other, went down to his house justified. Why? The publican was aware that he was a sinner, and he pleaded for God's mercy. His broken heart acknowledged his absolute dependence on God and not his own works. He depended utterly on God's atonement and mercy.

Conclusion: The Church was not established for the upright or the holy. If church people telegraph the message to others that only those who are OK can come to church or only those who have got their acts all together can come to church, we have misunderstood its reason for being. The church is a place for sinners. The publican was a sinner who came to church, confessed his sin, and found forgiveness from God. He humbled himself and threw himself upon the mercy of God.

Don't base your religion just on your feelings. The Pharisee probably went home feeling that he was close to God. But he was wrong. The publican may have gone home feeling that he was a long way from God. Yet he was the one who was forgiven and justified. Religion is not just a matter of your feelings. We should rely upon God and not our emotions. Salvation is by God's grace. We respond to it and accept it.

