

Sept/Oct 2012

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

## **PARTICIPATING** **IN THE PARABLES** **OF JESUS**

**ALSO: A BALANCED CHRISTIAN LIFE**

Friends:

Coins are remarkable, if you think about it. They're just chunks of metal with pictures stamped on them. Yet they have cash value, and they express patriotic messages that symbolize whole nations. If you have a handful and yet drop one, you'll likely crawl around to look for it. You can pay workers, or taxes, or other bills, with coins. You can hold one up and comment about the government it represents. Jesus referred to all these situations as he taught his followers. He used stories of everyday objects, like coins, to illustrate what God and life in his kingdom is like.



In October, we'll be exploring those parables, trying to understand what Jesus was teaching. More important, we'll be wondering what it means for us to live out and live into the pictures Jesus paints of life in God's kingdom. How can we participate in the parables?

But first, in our September devotions, we'll ask what it looks like to be a well-rounded and mature Christian. What ideas should we pursue, what actions should we practice, what passions should we encourage or discourage in order to grow deeply into the joy and love of God's blessing?

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

Steven Koster

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**“A Balanced  
Christian Life”  
George Young**



**“Participating in the  
Parables of Jesus”  
Dean Deppe**

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**re** FRAME MEDIA

# this month

## A Balanced Christian Life

**George Young**

Ever since biblical times there have been false prophets and teachers who bring confusion through their wrong teachings about God. When their lies are exposed, many people are so turned off that they give up on Christianity altogether.

This month we'll take a look at various slices of a simple, biblical, balanced Christian life. We'll look at the Bible honestly and truthfully, trusting that the deep, abiding peace and joy promised by Jesus, the one true Savior, will shine through.

*George and Ruth Young have been missionaries in northeastern Japan for the past 30 years. They have worked together with several pastors and many believers of the Reformed Church in Japan to plant churches and spread the gospel in a land where there are very few Christians. They have five children and nine grandchildren, all of whom now live in the United States, and they have one child in God's heavenly kingdom.*

## MATURITY AND BALANCE

*[Becoming] mature . . . we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by . . . deceitful scheming. —Ephesians 4:13-14*

When I was a boy, my father would take my brothers and me fishing for porgies and sea bass off Long Island in the Atlantic Ocean. Various fishing parties would pay to go out early in the morning in what were called “party boats.”

But I can tell you that when the sea got rough, it was no party. Under those conditions I would get seasick. Being “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind” can be so miserable that the best a wretched sailor can hope for is to find oblivion in sleep.

Paul compares the life of an immature Christian to such misery.

Martin Luther, a 16th-century Reformer, compared an immature Christian to a drunken peasant who climbs onto his

horse only to fall off the other side. Seasickness and drunkenness both affect a person’s sense of balance. But more pitiful than literal nausea is a faith that staggers from one foolish and mistaken idea to another.

This month we will look at biblical principles that will help build us up and give us a well-rounded, balanced faith, so that we may “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

O God, we long for the spiritual maturity that you have in store for us in Christ and that you work in us through your Spirit, in the church, the body of Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.

## THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

*You have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*

—2 Timothy 3:15

Maybe you have heard the story about the person who sought the Lord's guidance in a superstitious way. He laid the spine of his Bible on a table, glanced up to heaven, closed his eyes, and let the Bible fall open. Then, with his eyes closed, he stabbed his finger down on a verse. He opened his eyes and read, "He went into a cave and spent the night" (1 Kings 19:9). Then he repeated the process, and his finger fell on the text "Go, and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). Now a bit confused, he tried this method a third time and read, "What you are about to do, do quickly" (John 13:27).

This person aimed to seek God's guidance, but he got things a little twisted: the passages of Scripture are not to be understood in isolation, at random, or in fragments, but within the context of the stories

in which they are found. And difficult passages are to be understood in the light of more foundational passages.

Interpreting the Bible is not a matter of magic. Since all the books of the Bible are inspired by one Author, the Spirit of God, it is not a hodgepodge of contradictory, crazy teachings. If we patiently learn from the Bible, it will make us wise for salvation and train us for a life of serving the Lord.

We are thankful, Lord, for the Scriptures you have given us to teach us your way of wisdom for living. Thank you also for faithful believers who help us understand your Word to us. In Christ we pray. Amen.

## DEEP ROOTS

*Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked. . . .  
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water . . . .*

—Psalm 1:1-3

In desert and semi-desert areas there are bushy plants called tumbleweeds. After a season of growth and meager rainfall, the plant dries out, breaks free of its root, and rolls across the open land, blown by winds and scattering seed as it goes.

Not long after World War II something similar happened to some of the friends I grew up with. Blaming God for the great tragedies and horrors of the war, they cut themselves off from anything that had to do with their Jewish or Christian roots. They became like tumbleweeds, committed to no moral principles, or to constantly shifting principles, and they scattered destructive seeds of skepticism and radicalism wherever they blew.

We don't understand why God allows evil to happen. But it is a mistake to try to shift the blame

from human sin, which causes wars, onto the one righteous God who "breaks the bow and shatters the spear" (Psalm 46:9).

Those who trust in the Lord and delight in his law are like trees planted by streams that don't run dry. Their leaves stay green, and they bear fruits of righteousness. They have deep roots that sustain them in times of drought, and they are not blown here and there, as scoffers are. And when the Lord's Word convicts people of sin, they repent and grow in faith.

Lord Jesus, thank you for the living water you give, that quenches our deepest thirst and keeps us alive in the barren times we sometimes must live in. Amen.

## THE FOCAL POINT

*He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

—Colossians 1:17

Leonardo da Vinci and other artists in the Italian Renaissance mastered the use of the focal point and the vanishing point, which give perspective to a painting. They learned that objects near you appear larger, while objects in the distance seem smaller. So, if you want to draw a house that looks natural, draw lines from the peak of the roof and the base of the foundation that extend all the way to the vanishing point on the horizon. You will begin to see the outline of the house, and then you can work from there. Similarly, the focal point in a picture is the point to which all elements in the picture draw your eye.

Christ is the focal point that gives perspective to our lives. Without a focal point, certain parts of life may loom too large, while other parts are not large enough. Everything is out of

proportion; somehow it just doesn't come together into a life that makes sense.

"He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." If our lives are centered in Christ, we will have the right reference point to guide all our pathways, to help us make the many decisions necessary for a well-balanced life.

Jesus teaches us to "seek first" the kingdom of God "and his righteousness," and all the things we need will be given to us (Matthew 6:33).

Thank you, Jesus, for such amazing grace that we may know you, the Lord of the universe, who holds all things together and upholds our lives! Guide us to focus on you. In your name, Amen.

## COVETING

*I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."  
—Romans 7:7*

A rollicking Irish folk song goes like this: "The more a man has, the more a man wants. This I don't think true. I never met a man with one black eye who said he wanted two."

Joking aside, covetousness is a restless evil that never leaves us content with the blessings God has given us. It is a form of ingratitude. There are few things that destroy peace of mind so much as covetousness.

When we covet, we forget the blessings we have and desire what we don't have. And if we get what we are coveting, we soon want something else we don't have. Ovid, an ancient Roman poet, put it this way: "We are ever striving after what is forbidden, and coveting what is denied us."

The apostle Paul said, in contrast, "I have learned the secret

of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:12-13).

This is possible only if we are "in Christ," as Paul says—if Christ is dwelling in our hearts through faith (see Ephesians 3:17). We can know the peace that "transcends all understanding" (Philippians 4:7), that delivers us from the restless evil of being discontented even with the blessings we have, continually wanting more.

How blind and foolish we are, O God, if we ignore the riches you have given us, and go grubbing in the dirt for something better. Teach us thankfulness in Christ. Amen.

## PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

*Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.*  
—Luke 18:1

Why do so many Christians often struggle to pray? Just as there are pitfalls in communications between people, there are sometimes disconnects in our communicating with God.

We might liken prayer to a buffalo surrounded by a pack of wolves that dash in when the great beast's head is turned. Slashing with their fangs, the wolves seek to hamstring the buffalo or to get at its throat.

And what are the wolves? Well, one of them can be impatience with the timing of God's answers. For example, we might pray for the healing of someone we love. But if they are not healed right away, or if they die, we might, in our grief and despair, give up believing that God can heal or that our loved one can receive a better healing in God's presence. The wolf of unbelief nips in and out, work-

ing skillfully with the wolf of impatience.

Another wolf can be the drying up of our impulse to read the Bible. In prayer we talk to God, and in his Word he speaks to us. If we falter in prayer, however, and if we seldom read the Bible, God's voice becomes fainter and fainter, and our response is less grateful, less soul-searching, and less frequent.

Another wolf can be busyness, or a mind that wanders even when the words of prayer are on our lips.

In all of this, remember what Jesus says: *Keep on praying; don't give up.*

Lord, teach us to pray. We want to know you more, not less and less. Help us to pray often, deeply, and from the heart. Amen.

## THE BIG PICTURE

*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*

—Genesis 1:31

Even before Rachel Carson's 1962 bestseller *Silent Spring* helped to put ecology on the map, I was an ecologist at heart, reading Henry David Thoreau, John Burroughs, and John Muir; loving the forests, the mountains, and the sea—and all their rich life. But it wasn't until I heard the message of salvation through Christ that I began to see the bigger picture, of which the world of nature is a part.

Unless we recognize nature as God's creation, the beauty we see in it will be no more than a freakish accident in a chance-ruled universe, and we will paradoxically idolize nature. Unless we recognize our own sinfulness, we will become enraged about the pollution of nature and self-righteously blame it on others. Unless we understand how much the Creator loves the world he made, sending

Christ to bear God's totally justified wrath against evil, our frantic efforts to purify the world will be fatally flawed by our own unredeemed corruption.

But once people turn to Christ and are saved, they grow to love the creation all the more, gain a clearer picture of how the fall of humankind has polluted our own hearts as well as our environment, and want to work for the redemption of human hearts, human society, and the creation that is groaning all around us (Romans 8).

Glory be to your name, Lord, for the beauty of all you have made. We are ashamed to have trashed it. Through Christ, help us restore what we have ruined. Amen.

## NOT ALONE

*You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.*

—1 Corinthians 12:27

God said it is not good for man to be alone. Loneliness can be a terrible bane. So God made us male and female, to add balance and spice to life. God made marriage for mutual companionship and mutual help—especially since opposites attract. For example, where one is tone deaf, the other may be musical.

But opposites can eventually irritate each other too. So love and respect for each other's strengths and forbearance of each other's weaknesses are necessary for it all to work.

But whether God has called us to be married or single, there is another community that soothes our loneliness: the church of Christ. Yet some of the same dynamics come into play there as in married life. In the church we are one body, but each person is different.

And Jesus commanded us to love one another. That's a tall order! Don't break the unity of the Spirit and leave the fellowship, or you will be alone, as Adam was before Eve came.

Use your talents together to glorify the God who calls us to be like a light in darkness to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. Patiently learn to work together in the church; listen carefully to each other. Don't leave in a huff when things don't go exactly the way you like. The church brings deep companionship and balance to our lives as few other things can.

Lord, everything in our society conspires to tear us away from the church, the body of Christ. Help us to be faithful members of your body. Amen.

## YOUNG AND OLD

*I too was a son to my father, still tender, and cherished by my mother. Then he taught me . . . "Take hold of my words. . . ."*

—Proverbs 4:3-4

One of Norman Rockwell's famous paintings, *Saying Grace*, depicts an old woman and her grandson bowing their heads before eating in a cramped working-class restaurant. Outside the window, steam engines can be seen in a rail yard. At the other side of their little table, two hard-bitten young truck drivers look on awkwardly, cigarettes dangling from their lips. It's an interesting picture of the interaction between generations and subcultures.

In some churches older believers use their positions of influence to speak negatively about youthful music. In other churches, younger believers are deliberately courted to the exclusion of elderly tastes. Both concepts of the church are shortsighted and leave their members poverty stricken. By driving a wedge between young and old, they

seem to ignore the Scripture that says, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Today, it seems, we add a comment, as if to say, "But it's OK if young and old *are not* one in Christ."

The biblical vision is that young and old live together in harmony and mutual respect—the old imparting the wisdom they have gained through years of experience, and the young encouraging the old and embracing new kingdom adventures with exuberance and strength.

Lord, give us wisdom and love for old and young, and everyone in between. Amen.

## WHAT SHALL WE EAT?

*I am convinced . . . that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.*

—Romans 14:14

Eating disorders are once again in the media. In reaction to obesity and overeating, people get into fad dieting and ideologies that reject whole categories of foods. *Orthorexia* is a new word describing malnutrition brought on by avoiding specific foods in the belief that they are harmful.

How can we avoid the extremes of stuffing ourselves and starving ourselves?

First, remember this principle: “Everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:4-5). We need to be wise about what we eat, but we must also recognize that not every claim about foods being bad for us may be true.

Second, remember that our bodies are temples of the

Holy Spirit. “I have the right to do anything,’ you say—but not everything is beneficial” (1 Corinthians 6:12). Just because you can thank God for a fast-food meal does not mean that every meal for a month should be a burger with super-sized fries and a soft drink.

Third, those who gladly receive all from the hand of God should not despise people who abstain from certain foods. It’s not a loving attitude.

Thank you, O God, for the deliciousness of food. Keep us from harming our health by either gorging on food or becoming legalistic about it. Thank you for living within us, in Christ. Amen.

## A GENTLE AND QUIET SPIRIT

*Your beauty . . . should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit . . .* —1 Peter 3:3-4

Is Peter against cosmetics, jewelry, and attractive clothing for a Christian woman? Should she dress, say, in cotton-padded pants and baggy jackets like those that Mao Tse Tung required as the uniform of men and women in revolutionary China? Some Christians have interpreted Peter in a way like that, and they make a point of dressing drably. Today let's learn a principle of biblical interpretation that will steer us around such pitfalls.

Peter's teaching method is characteristically Hebrew. It depends on a shocking impact to get you to think. Jesus taught that way too: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother . . . such a person cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Be careful not to jump to the wrong conclusion. Jesus is not flying in the face of the

fifth commandment, which calls us to honor our father and mother. Rather, he is saying that our love for him must be even greater than our love for our parents.

Peter is saying that if we do not have a gentle and loving spirit, no amount of jewelry, cosmetics, or gorgeous clothing will help in fostering the kind of love that will keep a man and woman together, or win an unbelieving spouse to Christ.

Lord Jesus, please work in our hearts and give us a truly gentle and loving spirit. And may our choices of clothing honor you and complement the joy and peace with which you fill our lives. For your sake, Amen.

## EXAMINING OUR PRIORITIES

*“Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?”*

—Matthew 6:25

Look at a ruby-throated hummingbird or a peacock, and you will have no doubt that God loves to clothe his creatures beautifully. The same is true for orchids and roses. So, it's not wrong to be dressed nicely, even beautifully.

But there's something sick about going to “shop until you drop,” as some people do by dashing from one boutique to another, looking for the latest trends to make a fashion statement. Sometimes it's called worldliness, which means losing the balance of honoring God more than the world in all we think, say, and do.

I sensed the problem one day when I arrived at a church just in time to lead the worship service, having gotten caught in a terrific traffic jam. As the elder prayed before the sermon, I thought, “I'll just run a comb

through my hair while everyone's eyes are closed.” After all, I was a bit wind-blown after such a long ride, and who wants to see a preacher with his hair all messed up? In a flash, however, it came to me that a time of prayer is not the time for a person to think about his own looks, but to worship God.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, “There is a time for everything.” But if we are preoccupied with clothes or money or food, and we forget about God, we've got our priorities mixed up. As Jesus put it, “seek first his kingdom,” and all that we need will be given to us as well.

O God, may we focus on you, and trust you to make us beautiful in your sight. In Jesus, Amen.

## AN ADULTEROUS GENERATION

*"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'"*

—Matthew 5:27

These words of Jesus are especially relevant to our generation. Pornography is freely accessible, almost unavoidable, on the Internet. And magazines that pander to lust defend their right to publish by freedom of the press. Such "freedom" is no more than a lie that cleverly disguises the chains of slavery for the eagerly gullible. How can a person expect to find harmony and balance in a life consumed with raging lusts?

In adulterous generations like ours, people who turn to Christ for salvation must struggle to break the chains of lust. In the past, some have gone to the extreme of gouging out their eyes, only to find that adulterous dreams continue to plague them. But we know that Jesus' words should not be followed literally.

Paul's teaching is the same as Jesus' when he says, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24). And James says, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). If we don't do that, we will be "like a bird darting into a snare, little knowing it will cost him his life" (Proverbs 7:23).

O God, by your Spirit living in us, give us faith and strength to put to death all that is sinful in us, and fill our lives with what is healthy and wholesome, in keeping with your will. In Jesus' name we ask this. Amen.

## TAKING OFFENSE

*Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you?"*  
—John 6:61

The Greek word for “offend” here (*scandalizo*) literally means “to trip, or cause one to sin.” It’s also the root of the English word *scandal*. If someone has insulted you, you will rightly be offended, or scandalized.

But there is also a phony kind of taking offense.

The gospel accounts of Jesus’ life tell us that the leaders of the Jews often looked for an excuse to attack Jesus. When he talked about himself as the bread from heaven, that his flesh and blood would feed a person for eternal life, they had all the ammunition they wanted to accuse him of cannibalism—or at least insanity. They took offense, became scandalized over this, and went off in a huff.

If only they had considered Jesus’ words fairly and not put an obviously wrong spin on

them! They would have seen that he was using an analogy: belief in the Messiah is a kind of eating by which we can live forever, just as earthly food sustains our physical life.

Give Jesus a fair hearing. Give others a fair hearing. Don’t go looking for an excuse to become offended. Love “is not easily angered,” says 1 Corinthians 13:5. Heaven knows there’s enough ill will in the world without sniffing around for more.

Father, thank you for not looking for an excuse to condemn us. Thank you that instead Jesus bridged the gulf that our sin had made between us and you. Thank you for reconciling with us through Christ’s blood. Amen.

## LIFE NOT DOMINATED BY FEAR

*“Who are you that you fear mere mortals, human beings who are but grass, that you forget the LORD your Maker, who stretches out the heavens . . . ?”*  
—Isaiah 51:12-13

Recently in several parts of the world, militant atheism has received a lot of coverage in the media. It tries to give the impression of being defiantly courageous.

But reality tends to be just the opposite. Life lived without God, or with only passing reference to God, is usually dominated by a fear of people and what they can do. And life dominated by fear is crippled.

Take a few steps back from the bluster and threat of the people whom you fear, and listen to the words of Isaiah 51, which calls to us with compelling logic: “Who are you that you fear mere mortals, human beings who are but grass, that you forget the LORD your Maker, who stretches out the heavens and who lays the foundations of the earth, that you live in constant terror every day because of the

wrath of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction? For where is the wrath of the oppressor?”

Those who know that God loves his creatures, who have taken refuge in Christ, being saved through his death on the cross, should always remember the words of Psalm 91:1-4: “Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. . . . He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge . . . .”

O Lord our Maker, give us courage in the midst of fearful situations in life. May we, like Jesus, not flinch, but forge ahead with joy, in your love. Amen.

## ALL HAVE SINNED

*I thought, "... They do not know the way of the LORD. . . . So I will go to the leaders . . . ." But with one accord they too had broken off the yoke . . . .*  
 —Jeremiah 5:4-5

Activists in India have coined the word "gendercide" for the systematic killing of girls by abortion or by their "disappearance" after birth. The age-old custom of dowries, which parents of girls have to pay the groom's family at the time of their daughter's marriage, makes it highly expensive to have daughters in India.

Activists assumed that the tendency to kill girls must be especially high among the masses of India's poor. But they found that the middle and upper classes were *more likely* to kill their daughters because the dowry those classes were expected to pay was proportionally higher because of their wealth.

Similar stories can be repeated in country after country. Thomas Jefferson, the author of the famous words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident;

that all men are created equal," could not afford to free his slaves because he had run up too much debt buying imported luxuries.

The Bible teaches that there is no individual, class, race, gender, or political or religious group that is free of sin. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The humility of that awareness gives priceless balance to our lives.

Father, how can we take your love for granted, and at the same time judge others mercilessly? Give us a heart that is eager to do what's right in society and in our own lives. Amen.

## A PASSION FOR JUSTICE

*"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?"*  
—Isaiah 58:6

History is littered with attempts to bring about justice, to find "systems so perfect that no one will need to be good," as T. S. Eliot once said. In the past century, revolutions in the name of perfect, just societies have massacred innocent people by the millions, bringing about unprecedented misery and massive injustices of their own. Cries for justice are sometimes so politicized by the ideology of class warfare that the jargon of justice itself is a turn-off.

If the Lord himself were not passionate about justice, we would almost rather despair of even trying, live in isolation, and let the rest of the world go by.

Believers whom God has called into the realm of politics have an opportunity to "loose the chains of injustice" widely. And it is important that we pray that

God will give them wisdom to tear out deep-rooted injustice.

For those in other callings, justice is sometimes simpler, like giving a cup of cold water in Jesus' name. Harder than that, though, is breaking out of our own self-centeredness and listening to the voice of compassion within, "when [we] see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from [our] own flesh and blood." Bob Dylan sings about the homeless, "What good am I . . . if I just turn away when I see how you're dressed?"

We look up to you, Lord Jesus, the just Judge of all. Search our hearts, that we may be a part of the solution, not the root of the problem. Amen.

## A PASSION FOR EVANGELISM

*"The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."*

—Luke 19:10

It is sad that many Christians who are passionate about social justice are not passionate about evangelism, and vice-versa. Worse yet, they can be in opposing camps, mistrusting each other and content to focus on their part of the Christian life, as if a plane could fly with just one wing.

Jesus felt the same compassion for lost sinners that he felt for people who were poor, hungry, blind, and lame. He came for the very purpose of seeking and saving the lost. He didn't preach good deeds as a religion to gain merit in God's sight. He clearly said, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:29).

Later the apostle Paul said, "I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16). Have you ever felt such a compul-

sion? Would you feel woeful if you had never explained to the lost how to be found? Would you use such forceful language as "We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God"?

"We were by nature deserving of wrath," Paul says. "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions" (Ephesians 2:3-5).

Do you feel compelled to share this good news? Do you see how it ties in with helping others? Christ wants to restore us—body and soul.

O God, guide us to balance our passions. Where we are lukewarm, teach us, so that we may help usher in your kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## GUARD YOUR HEART

*Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.*  
—Proverbs 4:23

Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8). To some, a pure heart does not seem particularly necessary. They may say, “Just so long as you don’t hurt other people, it doesn’t matter what goes on in your mind.” Others will hear Jesus and say with regret, “*If only* I could be pure!”

The Bible says it’s not just difficult; it’s impossible, unless we are born again. In Ezekiel 36:25-27 God says, “I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

In Job 31, a seldom-read, wonderful passage, we see a man of God whose heart has been transformed. From the well-spring of its purity, generosity, and love flow justice and blessing to everyone around him, without political jockeying, strident demands, or bloodshed.

How a Christian longs for the purity of heart that will enable him or her to see God! Jesus promised the woman at the well, “The water I give . . . will become . . . a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14).

Come, Holy Spirit, give life to hearts of stone, and cleanse minds that are polluted. May we on the day of resurrection be counted worthy to see you in your holiness and glory, because of Jesus. Amen.

## NOT SWERVING RIGHT OR LEFT

*When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law . . . . And he is to read it all the days of his life . . . .*  
—Deuteronomy 17:18-19

These verses aren't warning against right wing or left wing politics; they're talking about the path that leads to life—the same thing Jesus talks about in Matthew 7:13-14.

There would come a day when Israel would want a king to rule over them. The king would be pulled in every direction (not too different from us)—tempted by money, power, mysterious religions, a variety of beautiful women, and pride that would make him think he was above the law, better than anyone else.

How was the king to guard himself against such temptations, keep himself on an even keel, and his nation on course? By reading the Word of God every day of his life, obeying it and pondering its mysteries. Joshua was told the same thing when he faced the frightening

challenge of leading millions of Israelites after the death of Moses (see Joshua 1:1-9). Psalm 119:11 gives the same wise advice: "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."

Read the Bible daily, think about it constantly, make it the formative influence in your life. It's not easy to make the time and develop the habit for this, but it's supremely important. Let the Word of God be your straight edge, your ruler.

Thank you, Lord, for the Bible, the Word you have given us. Give us a taste for its stories and eternal truth that show us the way to life. In Jesus, Amen.

## WHAT ARE YOU GOOD AT?

*We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.*

—Romans 12:6

Living a balanced Christian life doesn't mean being mediocre, a "jack of all trades but master of none." Each of us has areas in which we are skilled to serve the Lord and his church, but in other areas it might be better to step out of the way and bow to others who are more suitably skilled.

In the third grade I refused to memorize the multiplication tables. Ever since then, I limped along without math. In my childish stubbornness I unknowingly closed the door to a career in high finance (maybe even astrophysics!). But I loved to draw with crayons and read books, and my skills developed more in the direction of the humanities.

As a minister, I stand in awe of people who keep the finances of a church in good order, who can look at a spreadsheet with-

out becoming dyslexic. If I had to shoulder that responsibility, we'd soon be floundering in confusion. And some, in turn, would rather do anything other than standing in front of a congregation and preaching from the Scriptures. We need each other to be whole.

No one person has all the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Everyone has some gift to lay before the Lord. In our preaching, teaching, encouragement, giving, service, leading, showing mercy, and more—we offer ourselves as living sacrifices to him.

Thank you, Lord, for your strength, and for the strength we have together as followers of Christ in the church. Thank you that we do not have to stand alone. In your name, Amen.

## SLAVES TO SIN, SLAVES TO RIGHTEOUSNESS

*At the end of your life you will groan. . . . "How I hated discipline! . . . And I was soon in serious trouble in the assembly of God's people."*  
—Proverbs 5:11-14

Murder does not generally come from out of nowhere; adultery does not spring full-grown all at once. These sins begin like cute little cubs, from small indulgences that grow and grow till they are raging beasts.

A person may be overcome with love, looking into the eyes of their beloved as they repeat, with good intentions, "I pledge to be true to you, forsaking all others." But when temptations creep in, they may think, "Well, a little wayward thought can't be too harmful."

Or even a nice person, when crossed, may fume and rant inwardly and coddle hate.

"You used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness," says Paul. It grows if you let it. You may think, "Just a little . . ." But it doesn't stop at that. Like one

too many drinks, the addiction grows.

Being set free from slavery to sin includes taking Christ's yoke onto your shoulders, pulling the plow, and learning from him. Taking up his yoke implies there's some hard work involved when you might want to just lie down rather than pull. That's probably why Paul uses the metaphor of being slaves to righteousness.

True repentance says, "I'm sick of this evil. I want to learn goodness from Jesus." It's the beginning of a new life, of health for the soul.

Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart. Help me to follow you and to learn from you. Amen.

## LOSING AND FINDING

*“Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.”*  
—Matthew 10:39

Jesus sure had a unique way of teaching! It makes a person’s mind work overtime thinking about what he meant by “losing and finding” our lives. These words, spoken to the twelve disciples as he sent them out to preach, are worth meditating on the rest of our earthly days.

These words apply not only to traveling evangelists but in various ways *to all people, to all Christians*, and to the sacrificial life we must live. Paul says, “He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Corinthians 5:15).

“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). Of course, that makes us think of Jesus on the cross. How about the firefighters in the World Trade Center towers on

9/11/2001, or parents sacrificing deeply for their children? Among warriors in feudal Japan there was a saying that a Samurai lives to die for his lord.

A mature Christian life is not a matter of moderation in everything so much as learning how to spend your life for *your* Lord. You may literally have to lose your life as a martyr. But most Christians face the challenge of holding nothing back, living for Christ, day in and day out for many long years—which is not easy either.

Lord Jesus, we like the idea of growing, but we struggle with giving up the parts of our lives that need to submit to you. Show us how to live sacrificially for you. Amen.

## HEALING

*When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick.*

—Matthew 8:16

In A.D. 410, barbarian tribes poured into Rome, ravaging and pillaging the proud city. In response to critics who said the rise of Christianity had weakened Rome, Augustine, bishop of the city of Hippo in North Africa, wrote *The City of God*. In that lengthy book, which became a major influence in Western civilization, Augustine brought assurance to those who had been violated and explained how Christ brings hope to the world. In his writing Augustine aimed to bring the healing power of Christ and his good news to people's traumatized hearts and lives.

The Lord Jesus himself was "a man of suffering, and familiar with pain" (Isaiah 53:3). From the time of his boyhood in Bethlehem, where he barely escaped a massacre, to his death on the cross, he was the target

of violence and hatred. But he moved with love among the people of Israel, healing miraculously with a touch or a word.

Over the door of a great hospital in New York City is an inscription: "Of The Most High Cometh Healing." Whatever haunts your heart and threatens to leave your life a ruin, look to Jesus for healing. Remember, "He took up our pain and bore our suffering" (Isaiah 53:4).

Heavenly Father, thank you for the healing of physical pains and difficulties. But we know that the root of our trouble is deeper, and that only you can ultimately heal our souls. Stretch out your healing hand today. Amen.

## WHATEVER YOU DO

*Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus . . . .*  
—Colossians 3:17

N. C. Wyeth, whose paintings gave us unforgettable images of the heroes of stories like *The Yearling* and *Treasure Island*, unfortunately felt compelled to write on the door of his studio, "I will not have Good Fortune or God's Blessing let in while I am working."

Exodus 31 tells quite a different story, of how God chose Bezalel and Oholiab and filled them with his Spirit. He gave them extraordinary artistic ability to make beautiful carvings, tapestries and cast gold, silver, and bronze furnishings for the tabernacle, the tent in which God lived among his people Israel.

When the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts, he gives us gifts to serve God. No calling in life is meant to be separate from God. Brother Lawrence, a lowly monk, "practiced the presence of God" while washing dishes

in a monastery kitchen. The prophet Zechariah describes the world transformed by the coming of the Lord: "On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells of the horses . . . . Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty" (Zechariah 14:20-21).

"Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Everything in life is made fruitful, beautified, sanctified, and brought into balance when we do it for the Lord.

Lord, keep us from thinking we can separate our faith from the rest of life. May all we do bring glory to you. In Christ, Amen.

## FORGIVENESS, JOY, AND PEACE

*The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. —Philippians 4:7*

In my youth, when elephant jokes were the rage, a friend challenged me not to think of pink elephants for the next five minutes. "I bet ya can't keep 'em out of your mind," he said.

But Christ's followers, says Paul, can and should direct their thoughts, in the power of Christ, to things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy. Martin Luther said about temptations, "You cannot keep birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair." The peace of God should guard our hearts and minds.

There have been times when I was oppressed by desolate thoughts going around in vicious circles. And I have seen people walking the streets snarling to themselves, tortured by some nameless horror.

Forgiveness from God is the beginning of breaking the vicious circle. In turn, when we follow Christ's command to forgive those who have wronged us, we are freed from the chains of lifelong grudges and bitter thoughts. And it helps to know that the love of the Creator of the universe surrounds us. That knowledge changes the world we inhabit, lifts us out of the slimy pit, and puts a new song in our mouth (Psalm 40:2-3). A life of joy and peace dawns after we leave the dark night of sin that enslaved us.

God our Father, pour the healing peace of the Holy Spirit on our troubled souls, and may we be a blessing for others who seek peace and refuge with you. Amen.

## A STRONG TOWER

*May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry. I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death.*

—Psalm 88:2-3

In Tokyo there's a new free-standing broadcasting tower 634 meters high (2,080 feet) and strong enough to withstand the earthquakes that often rock Japan. It uses engineering advances that allow it to sway with the most violent shocks and absorb them without snapping. It's called the Sky Tree.

Psalm 88 describes the loneliness, terrors, and despair that the writer experienced from youth to old age. It's one of the darkest passages of Scripture. It ends with the grim words, "darkness is my closest friend." It calls to mind the Simon & Garfunkel song "The Sounds of Silence," which begins, "Hello, darkness, my old friend."

Yet there is something deeply comforting about a passage like this, for throughout the psalmist's life, often in the midst of terrible suffering, he cried out day

and night to the Lord, calling him "the God who saves me." Today we know that Jesus came to save us. He too suffered, going to the darkest depths. He knows what we go through because he went through it—and so much more—for our sake!

Proverbs 18:10 says, "The name of the LORD is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe." When you meet with terrible troubles in life, run to the Lord, the strong tower. You may reel from the shock, but you will not snap.

Thank you, Lord, for being a strong tower of refuge for all who trust in you! Thank you for being there when the enemy of our souls attacks. Amen.

**“IF I . . . DO NOT HAVE LOVE . . .”**

*If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship . . . but do not have love, I gain nothing. —1 Corinthians 13:3*

The Cherokee cowboy humorist from Oklahoma, Will Rogers, famous in the 1920s and '30s, once said, “I never met a man I didn't like.” It's commonly known that a good sense of humor helps to keep us in balance amid the struggles of life, especially in relationships, and to “take things with a grain of salt.”

In light of that, you might enjoy renting the videos of an old TV series based on James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small*. It's about the challenges and misadventures of a country veterinarian who, with humor and tact, gently wins the hearts of people who sometimes are abominably rude to him.

Even more important than humor, *love* is indispensable for helping us “like” people, for keeping us from flying off the handle, for forgiving others,

for keeping our relationships healthy and our lives joyful.

In summary, 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that love is patient, kind, doesn't envy, doesn't boast, isn't proud, isn't rude, isn't self-seeking, isn't short-tempered, doesn't keep a grudge, doesn't delight in evil but prizes the truth, always protects, always trusts and hopes, always keeps hanging in there. Could there be a better description of how to get along with the difficult people we have to deal with every day, how to overcome evil with good?

How sad, Lord, that love is so often thought of as a sentimental, empty word. We know that love is the heart of your heart, the key to the universe. Teach us how to love you and the people all around us. Amen.

## TITHES: AN OLD, THORNY QUESTION

*“Test me in this . . . and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.”*

—Malachi 3:10

When a country grows prosperous, people tend to think their prosperity will last forever—and that it makes them superior. They lose their heads and spend lavishly on themselves.

God said to his people in a situation like that, “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while [my] house remains a ruin?” (Haggai 1:4). Self-centeredness leads to short-changing God and others in many ways, including the use of our income.

And, mysteriously, the bubble can burst. The center of prosperity can shift—from England, to America, to Japan, to China. Wealth slips out of our hands; “good jobs” dry up; hard times come. We “earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it” (Haggai 1:6).

Christians have often debated the question of tithes. Since Christ came and fulfilled the Old Testament law, must we still give 10 percent of our income to God? Some give a smaller percentage, since 5 percent of a large income is greater than 10 percent of a small income. But Jesus was more impressed by a poor woman’s gift of all she had than by the large gifts of wealthy people (Luke 21:1-4). “God loves a cheerful giver . . . and is able to bless you abundantly” (2 Corinthians 9:7-8). Ultimately, all that we have belongs to him (Psalm 24:1). So . . . what amount of giving restrains your selfishness and stimulates your faith?

Lord, open the purse strings of our hearts, that we may be blessed givers. In your name, Amen.

## NINETY-NINE AND ONE

*"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them."*

—Luke 15:4

There is a famous saying among Jewish rabbis: "Whoever saves one soul, saves the whole world." Its wisdom is deeper than what is called "common sense." It is deeper than the famous Zen saying, "Imagine the sound of one hand clapping," which is designed to jar a person into moving beyond the limits of reason.

Some people are "numbers people," and their contribution to the orderly functioning of society and the body of Christ is indispensable. But in order to understand Jesus' story of the shepherd who leaves a flock of 99 to search for just one lost sheep, we must remember how God made each of us in his own image.

Glenn Tinder of the University of Massachusetts speaks about the infinite value of one human being because we are made in

God's image. And C. S. Lewis criticized the vulgarity of those who seek to make us feel as insignificant as dust because the universe is so huge and we are so small.

Missionaries treasure this parable because they must sometimes work years in a stubborn land to lead one lost person to Christ.

Never allow yourself to think that you count for nothing. Christ died to rekindle the spark of the image of God placed within you that makes you human.

O Son of Man, there are so many things that are too amazing for me to understand—such as your love for the lost, and me among them. Thank you. In your name, Amen.

# this month

## Participating in the Parables of Jesus

**Dean Deppe**

Christians have cherished the parables of Jesus for centuries. We love a good story, and the twists and surprises in Jesus' parables capture our attention. We see ourselves in these stories Jesus told in the streets of Capernaum and along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Plain and practical, the stories hit home.

This month we will explore several significant themes in Jesus' parables. First, we catch new glimpses of God penetrating our world. The stories present a brilliantly painted image of God, not as an ogre ready to punish us but as a compassionate Father overflowing with grace and mercy.

Second, the kingdom of God comes alive. We see the reign of God realized here and now in the actions and words of Jesus.

Third, these unforgettable stories radically transform the way we look at ourselves, each other, and life itself. We recognize God's mercy and realize we don't deserve it. We know we must run to Christ for forgiveness and renewal.

So let's participate with Jesus in his parables. New insights, out-loud laughs, unexpected surprises, and convicted consciences will surely result as the Holy Spirit continues to apply these teachings to our lives and situations in today's world.

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## SURPRISED BY GRACE

*“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”*  
—Luke 15:20

The prodigal son is a selfish egotist with a “give me, give me” attitude. He demands his inheritance even before his father’s death. You could say he wishes his father were dead.

Not only does this son shame his father; he also exposes his family to community criticism. He severs his relationship with his brother by forcing a division of the property. Then, far from home, he chooses a wild lifestyle. He squanders his inheritance and goes bankrupt. He feeds pigs and eats their food—so, as a Jew, he becomes “unclean.” Thus he could no longer participate in Jewish life without extensive repentance.

Surprisingly, though, the father holds no grudges and demands no repayment. Instead of criticizing his son’s failures and examining his motives, the father runs to greet his returning son.

In a culture where no self-respecting head of a household would disgrace himself by this undignified action, this father welcomes his son generously. He halts his son’s speech of repentance and instead places a ring on his finger, symbolizing authority within the family. He wraps his son in a ceremonial robe, offering instant cleanliness. And he kills the fattened calf to celebrate.

Remarkable grace, unending compassion, incredible love. Our Father in heaven shows this also for you and for me!

Almighty God, my heart is filled with praise for your overwhelming grace. Thank you for welcoming me into your family. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## TIME TO CELEBRATE

*"We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again . . . ."*  
—Luke 15:32

This parable is often wrongly named. In the second part of the story the prodigal recedes into the background, and we meet his elder brother. The father actually has more trouble with this son than with the younger one. In the end we are not sure if the elder brother will even join the feast. But how would we behave in a similar situation?

Both the prodigal and the older brother are self-centered. The younger son's main concern is to rid himself of the restrictions of home and family life and be freed to do as he pleases in the attractive outside world. The older son grumbles about the sacrifices he has made and the luxuries he has missed while working and being responsible. He cannot acknowledge his father's joy; it makes no sense to him. In the end, the older brother excludes himself from

fellowship with his father just as the younger son did earlier.

We can understand the older brother's position; he was just following the normal cultural patterns, and he wanted to see evidence of a changed life before he would celebrate his brother's return.

Longtime Christians often place similar demands on others to shape up and get it together when really it is time to celebrate. The Father has welcomed home the forgiven sinner, and we must be ready to join the party.

Lord, we often act like the older brother. By your grace remove the blindfolds from our eyes so that we can see others as you see them. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

## THE FATHER AND TWO LOST SONS

*“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.”*  
—Luke 15:31

When we read this parable carefully, we discover that the main character is the father. One son leaves because he is rebellious; the other son rebels because he is self-righteous.

Since the younger son believes he will *never* own the estate, he takes his inheritance and runs. After squandering all his wealth, he assumes that he can *never* return home. But the father is *always* ready to welcome him back.

The elder brother contends that he has *never* disobeyed his father's orders, and yet his father *never* gave him a young goat to celebrate with his friends. Pleading, the father says, “My son . . . you are *always* with me.” They are on different wavelengths. The father builds bridges while the elder son puts up fences.

This parable cleverly contrasts the human *never* and the divine

*always*. Like the two sons, we often feel deprived. We feel we *never* receive what we deserve. Yet we seldom realize that the grace we receive is something we *never* deserve.

The compassionate love of the father holds the two parts of the story together. Out of love for the younger son, the father welcomes him home. Out of love for the elder son, the father leaves the celebration to explain and invite him in.

All that the Father has is ours as well. Do we realize how much he *always* loves us?

Father, your loving presence draws us into fellowship with you and all your children. Help us to show your gracious love to everyone. In Jesus, Amen.

## THE MASTER WHO SERVES

*"He will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them."*  
—Luke 12:37

The servants in today's parable are waiting for their master's return from a wedding banquet. They are prepared to greet him at the door and care for his every need, to meet his requests with their dutiful devotion.

Most of us would look at the beginning of this passage and stress the necessity of being dressed for service, attentively waiting for Christ's return. After all, as servants of the master, we must dedicate ourselves to serve Christ.

But something unusual happens. The master returns, dresses himself in work clothes, and serves his own servants. He prepares a sumptuous feast for the servers. The custodians, kitchen help, floor scrubbers, and dish washers recline in lounge chairs while the master bows in front of them to fulfill their every wish.

What a strange parable! But it's no more outlandish than the grace of God. Central to the kingdom of God is the character of the king. The master reveals himself as the best and most conscientious servant of all. The master puts our needs first and thinks about us before his own desires. The master's attention is always directed toward us.

When we grasp the servant heart of God, all devotion motivated by guilt, all legalistic performance, all superficial compliance to God's will vanishes. Overwhelmed with the grace of God, we offer all of ourselves in return.

Servant God, your giving is unfathomable, your devotion to us is unreasonable. Lord, etch your character into us. Amen.

## MERCY EXTENDED

*“Leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it.”*  
—Luke 13:8

We are all fruit trees planted in God’s garden. But we are useless if we do not fulfill the purposes of our Creator. God has a right to examine us, to investigate our fruit-bearing history. He has a right to expect us to be fruitful.

In this parable the landowner comes yearly to investigate the fruitfulness of his vineyard. After several years, it was obvious that the fig tree was useless; it did not bear fruit. So the owner wanted it cut down.

Do you know anyone who is just “taking up space”? Maybe you are like that. Some lives are so dominated by selfishness that there is no fruit remaining to benefit others. They are stone dead, dried up; all that remains are the ugly branches of criticism, cynicism, and pessimism.

What a scary thought that God’s own people can become like that. But the caretaker holds out hope: “I’ll dig around it and fertilize it.” Jesus is not finished with the deadest of human beings.

I know that God isn’t finished with me. Just as Jesus was raised from the dead, so life can return to a barren tree. Maybe you have given up on people—or on yourself. The caretaker says, “Give it another season.” Begin again and fertilize your relationships. Pray; offer someone a word of encouragement; nourish a friendship that has withered. God extends his mercy to us every day so that we can live for him.

Lord, extend your mercy to us and renew us. Fill us with new life by your Holy Spirit. Amen.

## UNFATHOMABLE FORGIVENESS

*“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”* —Matthew 18:21

Exaggeration can be funny. Jesus once talked about having a plank in your eye (Matthew 7:3-5), and his listeners probably broke out in laughter. Similarly, when Jesus described the debt of the first man in today's parable, the exaggeration would have been a jaw dropper. Ten thousand talents would have weighed about 300 metric tons and would have amounted to 200,000 years of a day laborer's wages! The crowd knew this debt could never be repaid.

But the king forgives the debt! Instead of losing everything, the debtor is free! He can start life over again, unshackled from debt and worry.

Similarly, Christ's forgiveness frees us from anxiety, remorse, and guilt. We are no longer in debt for our sin.

Jesus' parables are like a window and a mirror. The first

half of this parable offers us a window into the kingdom of God. Forgiveness is absolute and unlimited. But the window transforms into a mirror when we gaze into our own souls and discover how unlike God we are. Even after experiencing unfathomable forgiveness, the servant would not forgive the tiny debt owed him by another.

The parable began with a question: “Shall I forgive . . . up to seven times?” Jesus shows we should forgive so often that we lose track, because God has completely forgiven us.

Grace gives birth to grace. Is there anyone you need to forgive today?

Lord, thank you for your freeing forgiveness. Create in me a new heart like yours. Amen.

## THE ECCENTRIC OWNER

*“Are you envious because I am generous?”*

—Matthew 20:15

This parable is often called “The Workers in the Vineyard,” but the central character is really the eccentric landowner. The landowner needs workers to maintain his vineyard. Some hardy souls are standing on the street corner ready for work at daybreak. Others start work a while later. And then others. Some, however, loiter all day and put in only one hour of work at the end. How does the master respond? He gives all the workers the same pay!

This surprise gives us a window into the kingdom of God. God’s generous grace flows as freely to those who bow to Christ on their deathbed as to believers who have given a lifetime of service to Christ.

But the owner’s most industrious workers grumble and complain. And, surprisingly, he reprimands them, though they

have endured the burden of the work and the heat of the day.

God is so concerned with producing generous and compassionate people that he rewards those who don’t put in a full life’s work. And he expects the rest of us to be happy about it.

This story gives us a mirror in which we must examine the areas of our life that fail to reflect God’s character. Often we compare ourselves with others and are convinced we deserve more. But God’s generosity transcends human ideas of fairness. Divine generosity gives to all, expecting nothing in return.

Gracious God, kind Savior, make us gracious and kind like you. Remove stinginess and faulty comparisons from our eyes. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## THE MASTER'S ABSURD PATIENCE

*"He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed."*

—Mark 12:5

This parable—usually called “The Parable of the Tenants”—is really misnamed. The story is not mainly about the tenants but about the absurd patience of a loving God.

The parable is an adaptation of God's picture of his people in Isaiah 5:1-7. In Isaiah the vineyard is identified with Israel, whom God punished for a time by sending them off to exile. In Jesus' parable the vineyard also represents God's people, the Jews (now returned from exile). And their leaders know Jesus is talking about them (v. 12).

In Jewish storytelling, incidents were often repeated three times to indicate the completion of an episode. Three servants are sent to the tenants to collect fruit, but the first two are abused and the third is killed. The crowd likely expects the parable to end with that. So the

next words come as a surprise: “He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.” Jesus is talking about the many prophets God sent to his people in the past, who would not listen but would abuse his messengers. What absurd patience God had!

The story continues by saying the landlord sends his own beloved son to express his great care for his vineyard. But in rebellion the tenants reject and kill him too. In the end God's grace triumphs as he gives the vineyard to others (who become the church of Christ).

As God's people today, are we faithful in serving our Lord?

Father, we praise you for your patience with us. May we willingly serve, offering the firstfruits of our lives. Amen.

## KINGDOM SEED

*“Other seed fell on good soil. It . . . produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.” —Mark 4:8*

Christians often become discouraged when they ponder the loss of Christian values in some parts of the world today. Christianity seems to be dwindling backward rather than speeding forward. At such times it is important to meditate on this parable about kingdom seed.

The seed that fell on the first three types of soil failed to produce a harvest. When the crowd heard Jesus describing three failures to produce lasting fruit, they likely figured the story was finished. But Jesus surprised his audience by contrasting the three failures with three gigantic successes.

At first glance it seems that the story contains a fourfold structure—the seed falls on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns, and finally on good soil. But a closer look reveals that the thirty, sixty, and hun-

dredfold harvest balance the three losses. Human failure is contrasted with divine success. Kingdom seed keeps on sprouting and producing fruit.

Sometimes it seems that every story we hear centers on the hard hearts of people toward the gospel, or on shallow lives that wander from the truth, or on crowded, thorny hearts that squelch spiritual growth. But the surprise in the parable remains true today. The Lord’s kingdom seed has multiplication power. An unexpected harvest of abundance is what Jesus promises to each of us who hear the parable. Believe the gospel and live abundantly!

Lord, we believe your kingdom seed is growing and you will keep multiplying your harvest of righteousness. Amen.

**BY ITSELF THE KINGDOM GROWS**

*"All by itself the soil produces grain . . . ."*

—Mark 4:28

Mark 4 contains three seed parables. The parable of the sower (vv. 2-20) promises that the seed will take hold in the life of believers. The parable of the mustard seed (vv. 30-32) describes how small beginnings can produce amazing results. And today's reading, the parable of the seed growing secretly, pictures the growth of kingdom seed after its planting and before the harvest.

This parable also emphasizes that the farmer merely scatters seed but doesn't know how it grows as the seed and soil do their work. The lesson, of course, is that God cultivates what is planted. The Almighty is in charge, not us.

This parable comes to mind when I recall a family that occasionally worshiped with our church community. I visited them often in my work

as an evangelist. But then they stopped coming to church, and eventually I quit visiting them. Three years later they began attending again and made a solid commitment to Jesus Christ. God was working in their lives, though we didn't know how.

Spiritual results do not happen immediately. "First the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head." God is faithfully working behind the scenes, producing growth. So we can relax and not feel responsible for converting people or producing spiritual growth in their lives. That is God's work. Our work is to scatter seed and continue being faithful to Jesus.

Lord, we know that only your Spirit can transform people's lives. Help us do our part as you produce your harvest. Amen.

## GIANT CEDARS AND TINY MUSTARD SEEDS

*"The kingdom of God is like . . . the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants."*  
—Mark 4:30-32

To receive the full impact of Jesus' parables, it's important to understand some things about the Old Testament. For example, Jesus uses an old image from Ezekiel to tell a familiar sounding story with surprising twists. In Ezekiel 31 the world-dominating power of Assyria was compared to a huge cedar tree with far-reaching branches. Its authority spread as far as the eye could see.

But Jesus alters the old story by telling a parable about the kingdom of God as a mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds in those days. Though some considered it an invasive species, it grew to become the largest of all garden plants.

Jesus was saying that although it might not look like much, the kingdom of God would grow to become like a sprawling tree under which all the nations

would find refuge and blessing. The good news of the kingdom would spread wide from Jesus' tiny group of followers, whom some despised. And today we can see that it has spread throughout the world.

Just as God explains in Isaiah 51:2, "When I called [Abraham] he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many." When God is in control, one tiny element can be a powerful influence. If you feel insignificant, take heart; God can use you to accomplish great things for his kingdom!

Almighty God, we are amazed that you can use us to grow your kingdom. Reform our thinking patterns so we can honor you and live out the truths of this parable. Amen.

## YEAST IN THE KINGDOM?

*"The kingdom of God . . . is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour."* —Luke 13:20-21

Like the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the yeast also points to something small that produces amazing results. But in Israel, yeast often represented sin and evil. Did Jesus intend to speak of yeast that way in this parable? Apparently.

Only bread without yeast could be used at Israel's feasts. The smoke of yeasted bread was unacceptable to God (see Leviticus 2:11). Jesus had also warned against the yeast of the Pharisees, citing their hypocrisy (Luke 12:1). And Paul wrote, "Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch" (1 Corinthians 5:7). Leaven (yeast) was regularly identified with the pervasiveness of sin and wickedness.

So, mentioning yeast in a parable about the kingdom of God would throw his Jewish audience off guard. What was Jesus

saying? It didn't sound like he was talking about sanctified bread!

Again, Jesus often used shocking imagery to make a point. God could use even something despised to produce great results in his kingdom. Jesus may well have been saying that a despised group of former fishermen, prostitutes, and tax collectors could permeate the dead lump of religious Judaism with the good news of the kingdom of God.

And if God could use yeast, he can certainly use you and me!

Powerful God, you who use the unexpected in your plans, use us to carry out your purposes and to spread your glory. May your kingdom keep spreading throughout your world. Amen.

## GOD LOVES ALLEYS AND COUNTRY LANES

*“Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.” —Luke 14:21*

Again and again this month we have discovered the lavish grace of God. But on whom does God pour his abundant mercy? God loves even those whom no one else would consider.

In today's parable, those invited to the great feast replied with flimsy excuses. They were more concerned about their own affairs than about honoring the invitation of their friend and attending his special banquet.

Are any of us like that? When God invites us to join in his great celebration, do we turn a cold shoulder? Do we set our own agendas and priorities and neglect to listen to what the Holy Spirit wants from us?

Thankfully the parable does not end there. God continually invites more guests until his feast is fully attended. Like a census worker hunting for every

hidden citizen, God searches the city streets and the alleys, where the displaced and the drifters live. Then he heads out to the country lanes to invite those who are further displaced and disadvantaged. No one is left uninvited except those who cross out their own names.

We are like the servant who brings the invitation. We have the privilege of inviting everyone and anyone to the greatest party ever planned, the union of God and his people. Don't leave anyone off your invitation list! God doesn't.

Lord, thanks for planning the party to which all are invited. Convict me of my selfish pursuits and use me to bring your invitation to everyone. Amen.

## AN UNNAMED BUT MEMORABLE WOMAN

*“Do you see this woman?”*

—Luke 7:44

In the Jewish culture of the first century, women generally had few rights and were expected not to be seen or heard. Even in the gospel accounts, few women are named.

The anonymous woman in today's story crashes Simon's party and makes a scene as she lets down her hair in public. This would have been seen as seductive. Her perfume permeates the air. Her weeping breaks the awkward silence. Jesus knows what Simon is thinking, so he tells a brief parable about debts and forgiveness. Then he asks Simon a seemingly obvious question: “Do you see this woman?”

Simon really doesn't see her. He observes the woman's actions but fails to discern what is happening in the spiritual realm. Jesus understands that this woman is pouring out her deepest feelings of thanksgiving

and love toward God. It's a sacred moment of unconditional surrender and devotion to God.

This question reverberates into our time as well: “Do we see this woman?” We often choose to stay neutral, impartial, and detached when it comes to expressing emotion for God. But such a radical outpouring of affection to Jesus is healthy and pleasing to God.

The truly forgiven Christian pours out his or her love for Jesus. We need the eyes of Jesus to see and honor the beauty of such “great love” when a forgiven sinner shows it.

Lord, free us to see the love of others for you and to show our love too, in welcoming them for your sake. Amen.

## WHO IS OUR SAMARITAN?

*“And who is my neighbor?”*

—Luke 10:29

To the Jews in Jesus’ day, the idea of a “good Samaritan” was an oxymoron. The two words just didn’t go together. Some oxymorons today might be descriptions like “noble terrorist” or “righteous pimp.”

In Jesus’ parable, two religious leaders pass by and pay no attention to the man who lies beaten on the road. The audience would then expect the third person in the story to be the hero and resolve the conflict. Surely this would be a highly respected Pharisee, who worked twice as hard as any others to serve God. But to the surprise of his listeners, Jesus brings in a Samaritan, who becomes the neighbor.

The prominent neighbor text from the Old Testament said, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your

neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). When Jews talked about neighbors, they meant fellow Israelites. The Samaritans were descended from foreigners who came to live in northern Israel and mixed their religions with the worship of God after Israel was exiled (2 Kings 17:24-41). They despised the Jews, and the Jews despised them as unclean. A Jew would rather be left for dead than helped by such a person.

Are there any people you have decided not to associate with? Love does not allow limits to be placed on being a *neighbor*. I am called to be a neighbor to everyone, and to honor anyone as my neighbor.

Lord, your love knows no bounds. Guide my attitudes so that I can show love as you do. Amen.

## WHICH DO WE DESPISE TODAY?

*“God, I thank you that I am not like other people . . . or even like this tax collector.”*  
—Luke 18:11

Tax collectors were despised for two reasons. They were traitors because they collected taxes for the oppressive Roman Empire. And they overcharged their fellow Jews and kept the extra money for themselves. Because of these sins against God’s people, tax collectors were considered unclean. So it’s a surprise that in his parable Jesus speaks of a tax collector praying at the temple, where he wouldn’t be welcome.

The Pharisees, however, worked hard to be pure and spotless, to be able to say, with Psalm 26:4-5, “I do not sit with the deceitful . . . I . . . refuse to sit with the wicked.” If any of the Jews were righteous, it was the Pharisees. But Jesus says the tax collector in this story was justified—and not the Pharisee. That surely shocked his first listeners!

Today, however, we may have to avoid a similar pitfall. We might tend to despise the Pharisee and treat the tax collector as a hero. But that would be a mistake. We have to be careful not to be like the Pharisee, the one who despises others, even as we see that he’s a hypocrite.

Jesus’ judgment in this parable raises the question of how our assessment of people squares with God’s assessment. If we judge people as less than ourselves—whether Pharisee or tax collector—we are in danger of excluding ourselves from God. It’s that serious.

Lord, we sometimes judge both the sinner and the self-righteous. Instead of disdain, we need your compassion for all people. We ask for that in Jesus’ name. Amen.

## SHAME AND HONOR REVERSED

*"I will not," he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.*"  
—Matthew 21:29

Every culture has its particular views of honor and shame. Eastern cultures have strong codes of honor and shame about speaking to family members. In Jewish circles it was notoriously shameful to look your father in the eye and declare, "I will not." And yet that's what the first son in this parable does.

In Western society today that would also be disrespectful. But if my son refused me with such a response, I would probably reply, "Well, let's talk about this"—and I would explain to him why he needed to obey as well as to respect his father. But in first-century Palestine the father would have slapped that son across the face.

On the other hand, the second son in the parable says, politely, "I will, sir"—but then does not obey. The father would have been impressed with the show

of respect, but not with the result. This son does not truly honor his father.

Jesus tells this parable to challenge the definitions of honor and shame in Israel. Honor demands both respect and obedience.

What needs to be challenged in our culture today? Is the pursuit of possessions or status more respected than the pursuit of godly living? Do we live by a code of ethics that needs to be shifted by Jesus? What reversals of thinking and living are necessary as we try to apply this parable to our lives?

Lord, turn us upside down till we become right side up. Teach us to follow your ways faithfully. For your sake, Amen.

## WISE AND FOOLISH DEFINED

*“Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man . . . .”* —Matthew 7:26

At the end of his Sermon on the Mount, the most dramatic ethical and religious teaching of all time, Jesus closes with a parable to note that this teaching is nothing if people don't put it into practice. Wise people still heed this biblical advice.

Sometimes it takes a crisis to spur us to act on the truth. I know someone who would not quit smoking until he was diagnosed with cancer.

Jesus describes such a crisis in this parable. In desert lands a rare storm can roll through a mountain pass and sweep away everything that is lodged only in sand. Jesus pictures a disaster like that to describe the crisis of the coming of God's kingdom.

Interestingly, Jesus concludes the parable with failure. After describing the wise builder, Jesus leaves his audience pon-

dering the example of the foolish one. Jesus explains, “The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

Though not every disaster in our lives is a punishment, sometimes it takes a disaster to get us to pay attention to Jesus. We must live wisely, serving God faithfully. If we're living foolishly, we need to turn around before disaster strikes.

Understanding God's Word is a first step, and acting on it must immediately follow. When we obey God's Word, we stay in touch with our firm foundation.

O God, we desire to be wise builders in your kingdom. Guide us to be both hearers and doers of your Word. Amen.

## DECISIONS AND ACTIONS

*"Make every effort to enter through the narrow door . . . ."*

—Luke 13:24

Decisions can change our lives. Yet so often we are indecisive people who cannot get started in a new direction. We get into a pattern of living and just stay there for years. We would like to be closer to God and make a difference in the world, but it is just so comfortable and secure right where we are.

Jesus addresses just such a situation in today's parable. Like a prophet, he used harsh language to get people's attention. To motivate us, Jesus constructed parables about being ready for his coming (see Luke 12:35-48) and about closed doors that would keep people out of the great feast of the kingdom.

If you knew someone was going to break into your house tonight, for example, what would you do? You would make sure to be prepared.

Similarly, if you knew Jesus was going to return soon, you would stay attentive and prepared. And he does say he is coming soon, so we must be ready (Revelation 22:12, 20).

Jesus strikingly describes those who are not constantly in tune with living for God. There are those who "sit on the fence" and never make a decision. But it is never enough to know Christ from a distance. He wants to live in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. So let's allow the parables of Jesus to stir us and fire us up to new ways of thinking and action for the sake of God's kingdom.

Lord, agitate us if you must; disturb us if we need it; do whatever it takes to move us toward faithful service to you. Amen.

## A PRICELESS TREASURE AND ITS COST

*“When he found [a pearl] of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”*  
—Matthew 13:46

The kingdom of heaven is like a hidden treasure or a precious pearl. It's ours, and we have done nothing to earn it. Salvation, eternal life, the overwhelming presence of Jesus in our life—all this is a free gift!

Other rabbis told stories that sounded like these parables of Jesus, but the treasure was always a reward for doing charity or keeping the Sabbath. For example, Abba Judah was a charitable man who sold half of his field and gave the money to the rabbis. In return, they prayed that he would be blessed. When he plowed the rest of the field, his ox fell and broke a leg. But when he bent down to help the ox, he discovered a treasure of jewels.

Another story: Joseph observed the Sabbath with utmost care. Near him lived an unbeliever who owned a pearl of excep-

tional value. While the unbeliever was traveling over a bridge, a great gust of wind knocked the pearl into the river where it was eaten by a fish. On the eve of the Sabbath Joseph bought this fish from a fisherman. When he prepared the Sabbath dinner, he discovered the pearl that would make him very wealthy.

The treasure that Jesus offers does not demand strict piety, good works, or acts of devotion. It's free. Life in the kingdom of God is so valuable that it's worth sacrificing anything for. That is the mystery of life with Jesus—free, but priceless.

Lord, open our eyes to see the value of living with you and for you in the midst of this world. Thank you for this treasure. May we follow you faithfully. Amen.

## COMMITMENT AS A STRONG DEFENSE

*“Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money . . . ?”*  
—Luke 14:28

A half-completed building project or a foolish battle plan are both bad ideas. A wise person adds up the figures and considers the costs in whatever needs to be done.

Both parables in our reading for today speak about a strategic defense. Towers provided a lookout for watchmen to warn against an approaching enemy. Then the king could rally his troops and defend his territory. Jesus offers a defensive tactic for success in the battles that await kingdom warriors. The strategy is a strong commitment to preparation.

The life of a disciple includes many trials and tests of faithfulness. The enemy confronts us with one obstacle after another. At times we lose heart and are ready to give up. But Jesus discloses the secret of success—a decisive commitment. Our de-

fensive weapon is a commitment to Jesus that is willing to grasp the cross as a prize rather than as a nuisance.

The repeated theme in these verses is whether you are *able* to carry out a task. Each of us must ask, “Am I able to be his disciple?” This is a serious question. But Christ has won the victory. Because of Jesus, you and I can say, “Yes, I am able. ‘I can do all this through him who gives me strength’” (Philippians 4:13). It takes a radical belief in the power of Christ in us to stand firm and endure.

Lord, help me count the cost and commit to serving you. Please give me the grace to pursue the course you have given me—and in your strength, to prevail. Amen.

## A GENERATION THAT REFUSES TO RESPOND

*"The kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it."*  
—Matthew 11:12

There are so many voices trying to get our attention, time, and money that sometimes we just tune out and refuse to respond. We even become callous to God's words and choose the easy path of floating through life, paying attention to our personal well-being.

In today's parable, Jesus talks about children who try to involve others in a game. First they play as if they're in a wedding, with some playing flutes while others joyfully dance. But no one wants to play along. Then they act out a funeral by singing a dirge to create an atmosphere of mourning. But again no one participates.

Jesus points out that this generation is lethargic, sluggish, apathetic, uninvolved. John the Baptist proclaimed a thunderous message of the coming judgment, but few listened.

Jesus overwhelmed the crowds with the amazing grace and mercy of God, but most people refused to join in the kingdom dance of discipleship.

Would Jesus recite this parable to us today? Are we so caught up in our puny pursuits that we cannot see the advancement of God's kingdom? With Jesus' help, clear convictions and spiritual fervor can overcome fuzzy thinking and apathy.

Jesus closes with a proverb: "Wisdom is proved right by her deeds." In contrast to indifferent people, we can respond to Jesus. Through God's grace we can become attentive to the movement of the Spirit, whatever that may be.

Lord, we hear your lament.  
Help us to be attentive to  
your voice in our everyday  
lives. Amen.

## THE FOOLISH PATH OF SAFETY

*"I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you."*  
—Matthew 25:25

If you live in a capitalistic society, it's not surprising to hear of people investing with some amount of risk. But in ancient Palestine safe and secure investments were the norm. In a culture based on honor and shame, the loss of fortune meant the loss of dignity. To hide a treasure in the ground was the approved way to preserve your wealth. But Jesus challenged that way of thinking in the light of building up God's kingdom.

In Western countries lately, a noticeable change has occurred in people's spending habits. In response to economic slumps, people are more hesitant to spend and to give. Worried people are saying, "I'm going to protect my financial resources, no matter what it takes." But that sounds like the person in the parable who hides his

money in the ground to protect himself from loss and shame.

In hard times, self-preservation becomes the highest value for many of us. But Jesus reminds us of the security of the kingdom of God. Give, and it will be given to you. Invest your resources in kingdom causes, and they will multiply. Miserly, tight-fisted people do not inherit the kingdom of God. Instead we must become generous toward God, who gives lavishly to us. That's God's Word to us when we have lost a spirit of open-handed benevolence.

Generous God, remove self-preservation from my mindset. May the realities of investing in your kingdom be more important to me than the worries of this life. Amen.

## HEALTHY EYES NEEDED

*"This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."*  
—Luke 12:21

It has been said that the biggest obstacle to discipleship is possessions. However, I think the biggest opportunity for discipleship is also possessions. Materialism could be labeled a great sin of today's world, but material blessings are also a great help for many in need.

Many people in Western society live as if possessions and security are the most important things in life. In some ways like the rich man in the parable, many of us think, "I want enough wealth for years to come so that I can eat, drink, and celebrate."

The solution to this problem is described in Matthew 6:22-23. We need healthy eyes—that is, eyes that prompt us to be generous. Unhealthy eyes denote stinginess and selfishness. Proverbs 28:22 explains, "A person with an evil (unhealthy) eye hastens after

wealth and does not know poverty will come upon him" (*literal translation*). And Proverbs 22:9 says, "A person with a generous (healthy) eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor" (*literal translation*).

The parable in Luke ends with a call to be "rich toward God," because God is benevolent to the poor. In fact, any gospel that is not good news to the poor is not the gospel of Jesus. An eye that envisions the character of God and at the same time sees the needs of the poor is the secret to true riches. May each of us find real wealth.

Lord Jesus, save us from the sin of materialism and move us by your Spirit to be rich toward God and wealthy in compassion. Amen.

## A PERSISTENT PLEA

*“There was a widow . . . who kept coming to [the judge] with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’”* —Luke 18:3

Widows were often vulnerable in the ancient world, with very few rights, no one to advocate for them, and no one to care for them in their old age. The judge in today’s story wielded power and authority that was supposed to dispense justice for all. But the judge did not honor God or human opinion. Although it felt like a hopeless situation, the widow persisted each day with the same request for justice. Finally, the judge became so tired of her pleading that he decided her case.

Jesus told this parable to show his followers that “they should always pray and not give up.” Jesus tells this story to teach us about God. If a judge like the one in the parable gives way to the pleas of a helpless widow, how much more will God listen to the prayers of his people and bring about their deliverance!

God will surely come to the aid of those who cry out to him. He cares deeply for the helpless, the vulnerable, and the needy.

Correspondingly, we must be persistent in prayer. If a good-for-nothing judge can be swayed by persistent pleading, we can be certain that God will respond to our constant prayers. Further, we can be sure that at Christ’s coming, he will right every wrong and cure every injustice. So let’s pray each day that Christ will return soon and make things right.

Lord Jesus, in place of our often-fickle efforts of random prayer, give us a resolute determination to persevere in prayer. Grant us new habits and renewed enthusiasm. Amen.

## GIVE AND YOU SHALL RECEIVE

*"Use worldly wealth to gain friends . . . so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."* —Luke 16:9

In his parables, Jesus often uses controversial ideas and characters to gain the crowd's attention. In this story a corrupt financial manager becomes a sort of hero. The manager has wasted his master's resources. And when he is about to lose his job, he reduces the amounts owed by his master's debtors, to gain their goodwill. Then, strangely, the master commends the dishonest steward for his shrewd handling of his predicament. The word for "shrewd" here can also mean "wise." The same word is used to describe the wise man who built his house on a rock (Matthew 7:24).

But how is this manager wise? Though he is disreputable, he finds a creative way to "save his own skin" by giving generously of his master's wealth. In a quirky way this parable reinforces Jesus' teaching "Give, and it will be

given to you" (see Luke 6:38). The manager greatly reduces the debts of his clients, and his generous actions gain him lasting friends who will surely hire him or provide for him after he loses his job. Likewise, Jesus' followers who use their wealth to benefit others for the sake of God's kingdom "will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

We might think Jesus was mixed up. Economics teaches that we have to preserve wealth to get ahead. But giving makes us wise and pleases God, who holds all wealth in his hands.

Lord, your ways are higher than ours. Plant within us your spirit of generosity. Thank you for assuring us that "it is more blessed to give than to receive." In Jesus, Amen.

## OLD AND NEW TREASURES

*“Every . . . disciple of the kingdom of heaven . . . brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”* —Matthew 13:52

All of us are called to be balanced Christians. The brief parable we are looking at today indicates the value of the Old Testament teachings and stories of the people of God, and it points to the good news of Jesus' coming and the new life that he brings.

Did you know that Jesus came to fulfill the Old Testament law for our sake? (See Matthew 5:17-18.) The book of Matthew gives us many examples highlighting the old treasures of life with God for the children of Israel and the new abundance of full life as God's children for people of all nations through Jesus, the Savior.

Have you ever read through the entire Old Testament? Have you tried to explore how Christ is involved in every book? I encourage you to do so, aiming to mine its riches and understand its meaning. The whole Bible

contains valuable fresh insights as well as teachings that have stood the test of time. This has important implications for worship, church life, and institutional structures. Both structure and spontaneity, both the timeless and the timely, both tradition and change are valuable.

Balanced Christians see Jesus in the traditions of the past and in the powerful new work his Spirit is doing today. With wisdom in Christ, we cherish old treasures and celebrate new discoveries about full life in the kingdom of God.

Ancient of Days, thank you for your marvelous revelations in the past. King Jesus, we anticipate the new life and growth of your kingdom now and in the future. Amen.

## SALT AND LIGHT

*"You are the salt of the earth. . . . You are the light of the world."*

—Matthew 5:13-14

Jesus used parables for many reasons. But the parables we have read today describe how the Christian community is to act in today's culture.

We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Since the earth is made up of ground and sky, Jesus emphasizes that Christians are responsible to share the necessary spiritual energy for both. In the ancient world farmers used salt in small quantities to fertilize their crops. In the same way the Christian community fertilizes the world. Light is needed so that we can see. Christian truths provide light like the sun for the eye of the world to focus correctly.

Both of these word pictures include a warning as well. Impure salt can lose its saltiness. So can we. And a covering placed over a candle can suffocate the flame. Through wrong habits or

sinful neglect, we can emit dimmer and dimmer light till only a flicker remains.

But thankfully Christ is the light of the world—so luminous that the Christian community can shine more brightly with each generation. When the light of God's Word shines on us, the brightness of the city of God cannot be hidden. Jesus pours out his Spirit daily so that Christians—like salt—can produce a thirst for Christ, melt hard hearts and frozen human ideologies, and preserve the values of the Christian faith. What a wonderful identity we have in Christ!

Thank you, Father. With Christ in us we are the salt of the earth and light of the world, in your name! Amen.

## LOST AND WANDERING SHEEP

*"He calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'"*  
—Luke 15:6

Today's parable is found in both Matthew and Luke. The contexts, though, are different, so each has a different interpretation. In Luke we find tax collectors and sinners described as lost sheep, while in Matthew we find that people who struggle with obedience and stumble into sin are described as wandering sheep.

The parable in Luke reveals God's heart for lost sinners. The Pharisees totally excluded and refused to associate with certain groups of people. But Jesus cared about everyone. There is great joy in heaven over each sinner who repents. Are there people in your neighborhood that you have never thought of inviting to church? Jesus treasures them, and he wants the Christian community to value them too. The most exciting times should be when a lost soul is found. Ninety-nine is

not enough; we need that one more.

The parable in Matthew reveals God's care for stumbling believers. Disciples can get distracted and lose interest, struggle with commitment, or be worn down by tragedy and pain. We are called to nurture all who are in the church and to follow up with any who leave. Not only must we open the front doors of the church wider, but we must take care not to lose people by the back door.

Like the good shepherd, we seek out and nurture lost and wandering sheep.

Father, fill us with your love and concern for all who are lost and wandering, and may we all grow together in faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## ABOUT WEEDS

*"No," he answered, "because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them."* —Matthew 13:29

Are Christians charged by God to be militant crusaders who defend the faith by stomping out evil wherever they find it? Jesus answers that question with this parable.

In Jesus' day a political group called the Zealots demanded that all Roman soldiers be eliminated. Another group, the Pharisees, were extreme legalists and rejected many who were not like them. They despised lawbreakers and were convinced that the Messiah would not tolerate them. Even Jesus' disciples once suggested that they call down fire from heaven on a group of unreceptive Samaritans (see Luke 9:54). To all of these notions Jesus declares a resounding "NO!"

The world is like a theater with two movies playing at the same time. Good and evil get all mixed up together. The right-

eous are tempted to purge the world of all evil and to eradicate every organization or voice that contradicts God's truth. But Jesus warns that in the process some good plants can be destroyed. In addition, whenever we try to wipe out evil, we end up becoming self-righteous and cruel. We must leave it to God to judge and purge.

Even so, we should not become confused and begin calling a weed a flower. A weed is a weed. The right option is to magnify the attractive love of Jesus. If we turn on the light of Christ's love, darkness will scatter. So let's live by God's mercy and proclaim his truth, letting God be the judge.

Lord Jesus, equip us with your love so that your garden may thrive in the world. Amen.

## SEPARATION PARABLES

*"The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous."*

—Matthew 13:49

In today's global culture, we often hear that we must be open-minded and dedicated to tolerance. Everyone must be included—no one left out. These ideas are based on some principles of God's kingdom. But other kingdom principles, such as God's judgment of sin and evil, are often left out.

Jesus' parables include stories about the Lord separating weeds from wheat at the final judgment, and about a net from which edible fish are separated from fish that cannot be eaten.

Jesus' parables emphasize limitless grace, but they also highlight God's limitless demand. Few things are more important than our perception of God. If God is a seeking, caring God, then we should imitate his grace both for ourselves and in our treatment of other people. But we must also recognize and

proclaim a coming judgment, when good and evil will be eternally separated. Although we are saved by sheer grace (as Martin Luther rediscovered before sparking a reformation), grace is never cheap.

The kingdom is like the process of net fishing or wheat farming that, in the end, calls for separation. And the Lord is the one in charge of judgment.

But the upcoming judgment teaches us to put aside selfish pleasures and choose to do what pleases God and has eternal value. By grace and in God's strength, we can do this.

Father in heaven, guide us to commit daily to live for you. And may our lives promote commitment to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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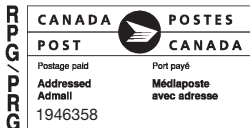
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