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## What Kind of Heart Do You Have? (Matthew 13:3–23)

The parables of Jesus have been called “The Greatest Stories Ever Told.” Seated in a boat anchored a short distance from shore on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus tells His first recorded parable to a large crowd. It is about a man sowing seed. After telling the story, Jesus’ disciples ask why He is speaking to them in *parables* (Mt 13:1–10). How does Jesus answer (13:11b)?

*Parables* teach us about **kingdom living**. Because of opposition from Jewish leaders, Jesus is forced to teach about *the kingdom of heaven* in *parables*. The word *parables* (PARABOLĒ, parabow-lay’) means “to place beside.” A parable places something unfamiliar beside something familiar for the purpose of teaching. It uses familiar scenes and objects to explain spiritual truths. A parable is “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.”

This story has been called “The Parable of the Sower.” However, it is really about four kinds of soils. Therefore, it should be called “The Parable of the Soils.” In verses 18–23, Jesus explains the **sower** represents God, the **seed** His Word, and the **soils** four different kinds of hearts, one of which represents yours and mine. **What kind of heart do you have?** There are only **four** possibilities.

### 1. A Hard Heart (13:3–4, 19)

Jesus begins this parable by saying, “*A sower went out to sow*” (13:3b). In Jesus’ day, a sower would walk through his field with a sack of seed under one arm. He would take a hand full of seed and fling it out as he walked. Jesus continues: “*And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them*” (13:4). Jesus explains that the seed sown on the path represents one who hears God’s Word but “*does not understand it*” (13:19a). What happens to this kind of hearer (13:19b)?

In biblical times, the *path*, or road, went directly through the fields. Compacted by feet, hooves, and wheels, the soil was concrete-like, which made it impossible for seeds to penetrate. Therefore, they would just lie on the surface, so birds would come and eat them.

This soil represents **a hard heart**. This is a person who repeatedly tunes out God. Such a person can sit through hundreds of great sermons and remain unmoved. What does Hebrews 4:7c–d say to such a person?

Every time God speaks to you through a song, a Bible study, a sermon, etc., and you refuse to respond, your heart gets a little harder. Eventually, the day will come when you can’t hear Him anymore because your heart is so hard. Don’t let that happen to you! If there is the slightest tugging in your heart to get right with God, then God’s Holy Spirit is drawing you to Himself. Therefore, if you hear His voice, don’t *harden your heart*.”

Do you have **a hard heart**? Or, do you have ...

### 2. A Superficial Heart (13:5–6, 20–21)

Jesus says of the second kind of heart: “*Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil,<sup>6</sup> but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away*” (13:5–6).

Jesus explains this is someone who hears God’s Word “*and immediately receives it with joy.*” However, this person doesn’t allow the Word to take *root*. Therefore, this kind of heart “*endures for a while*” (13:20–21b). However, what eventually happens (13:21c–d)?

The *rocky ground* is shallow soil with rocks underneath. The plants grow well until the hot, dry season comes, causing them to wither. This soil represents **a superficial heart** that makes impulsive, or emotional, decisions for Christ. As a result, his or her commitment to Christ only “*endures for a while.*”

There is an old saying: “A faith that fizzles before the finish had a flaw from the first.” The “flaw” is the superficial heart that makes an emotional, or superficial, decision that doesn’t last. True disciples abide, or continue, in Jesus’ Word. People with a superficial faith “fizzle” when “*tribulation or persecution*” comes. A superficial heart only follows Jesus when the circumstances are favorable. Just as quickly as this person commits to Christ, he or she defects, or “*falls away.*”

Do you have **a hard heart? A superficial heart?** Or, do you have ...

### 3. A Crowded Heart (13:7, 22)

Jesus pictures this kind of heart: “*Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them*” (13:7). What effect do “*the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches*” have on this person (13:22d–e)?

The soil with *thorns*, or weeds, represents a heart where God’s Word has rivals. The seed takes root in good soil, but the weeds come up and *choke* out God’s Word. The *thorns* represent two things that *choke the word* in our lives.

1. “*The cares of the world.*” The word *cares* means worries or distractions. Satan uses worry to choke out God’s Word from our hearts. It crowds out biblical thoughts and distracts us from applying the Word to our lives.

*Cares* are problems and pressures we try to handle by ourselves. Evangelist Vance Havner said, “Worry, like a rocking chair, will give you something to do, but it won’t get you anywhere.” God only promises to take care of us one day at a time.

God will give us the strength to meet each day He gives us to live. However, nowhere in the Bible does God promise tomorrow’s strength today. Here is a great saying: “Nothing can happen today the Lord and I can’t handle.” Take your focus off your *cares* and concentrate on God’s love, care, and power. You can’t think about how great God is and worry at the same time. Worry chokes out God’s Word from our lives and so does ...

2. “*The deceitfulness of riches.*” Money is deceitful because many people believe it will make them happy. As a result, they are so busy making a living, they don’t take time to make a life. That’s why Jesus asks what rhetorical question in Mark 8:36?

*Thorns*, or weeds, are signs of neglect. When you neglect prayer, Bible study, and worship services, weeds choke out the Word from your life. The important question is what is distracting you—what weeds are choking God’s Word from your life? It might be busyness, money, worry, etc.

Do you have a **hard**, **superficial**, or **crowded** heart? Or, do you have ...

#### 4. A Cultivated Heart (13:8, 23)

Jesus describes the fourth kind of soil: “*Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty*” (13:8). He explains the *good soil* represents “*the one who hears the word and understands it*” (13:23a–b). If this represents your heart, what does Jesus say you will do (13:23c–e)?

A cultivated heart lets God’s Word grow deep roots. It is cultivated by removing the “weeds” of worry. If you have this kind of heart, the Word “*bears fruit*”—spiritual *fruit*—in your life. This *fruit* is called “the fruit of the Spirit.” Galatians 5:22–23a lists the nine components of the fruit of the Spirit. Write them below:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.

*Love* comes first because it is most important. It is the “fertilizer” that causes all the other components to grow. The fruit of the Spirit is just a word picture of the Lord Jesus. As these nine qualities grow in our lives, we become more like Jesus. Fruitfulness is the test of true discipleship. Why, according to Jesus in Matthew 7:20?

Jesus also says this kind of soil produces a harvest of a hundred, *sixty*, or *thirty* times what was sown. In other words, everyone is not equally productive.

This parable reveals why there are so many opinions about Jesus. Opinions about Jesus range from liar or lunatic to Lord. What you believe about Jesus is not a matter of the facts, but a matter of your heart.

You have heard the Word of God. How you respond will be determined by what kind of heart you have. Do you have a **hard heart**, a **superficial heart**, a **crowded heart**, or a **cultivated heart**?

## FEBRUARY Blooming Where You Are Planted (Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43)

Have you ever wanted to live in an exclusive Christian community where everyone and everything are Christian? The grocery store would only sell “baptized butter,” “sanctified sandwiches,” “glorified grapes,” and “holy hamburger.” However, that’s not what **kingdom living** is all about. In the next parable—the parable of the weeds—Jesus reveals why God wants us to live among non-believers in this world.

The Jews misunderstood the kingdom of God. They thought the Messiah would set up an earthly kingdom. In the parable of the weeds, or tares, and wheat, Jesus reveals the kingdom of God is not a geographical area but a spiritual kingdom in which God rules. How does Romans 14:17b describe the kingdom of God?

Just as He did in the parable of the soils, Jesus uses the image of a farmer sowing seed. However, the main point here is not what happens to the seed. It is about weeds, or tares, sown in the midst of good seed. This parable reveals **three** aspects of **blooming where you are planted**. First is ...

### Recognize the weeds (13:24–26, 37–39)

Jesus begins this parable: “*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field*” (13:24b). Jesus explains: “*The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man*” (13:37b). *Son of Man* was Jesus’ favorite term for Himself. He used it more than seventy times in the gospels. Perhaps the most important is Luke 19:10. Write it below:

*Son of Man* refers to our Lord’s incarnation—He is God come to earth in flesh and blood.

In this parable, there are actually two sowers. After the “*good seed*” is sown and the owner’s workers are asleep, his enemy comes and sows “*weeds among the wheat*” and then leaves (13:25). The second sower (“*the enemy*”) “*is the devil*” (13:39a).

This field has two sowers and two kinds of seeds: “*The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom*” (13:38a–b). The *good seed* represents Christians who are planted right where the Lord wants. We are not to live in some monastery or exclusive Christian community, as attractive as that sometimes sounds. Who do *the weeds* represent (13:38c)?

The word *weeds*, or “tares,” translates a word that means “darnel.” Since it closely resembles wheat in the early stages of growth, “darnel” is almost impossible to distinguish from *wheat* until fully grown.

Just as the Lord plants His seeds where He wants them, so does *the evil one*—the devil. The *weeds* are “imitation wheat,” appearing to be good, moral people. Satan plants them among kingdom

citizens to voice the same question that he asked Eve in the Garden of Eden: “*Did God actually say ...?*” (Gen. 3:1c).

Once-great denominations are now asking this age-old question because *weeds* have been sown in their midst. They ask, “Did God really say premarital sex is a sin?” They also ask, “Did God really say Jesus is the only way to heaven?” The *weeds* have one thing in common. They attack the authority of the Word of God and try to make it more acceptable to our sinful culture. However, what did Jesus say in John 17:17b?

Some weeds go to church every Sunday. The basic difference between the good seeds and the weeds is what each believes about the authority of the Bible. To bloom where you are planted, it is critical to be able to **recognize the weeds** but to also ...

### **Reflect on the harvest (13:27–30, 39b–43b)**

When the weeds are identified, the workers come to the landowner and say: “ ‘*Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?*’ ” (13:27). The landowner tells them an *enemy* sowed them. So, his workers ask if they should pull up the weeds. He tells them, “*No*” because they might also uproot the wheat (13:28–29). The owner then tells them: “ ‘*Let both grow together until the harvest*’ ”—at which time he will instruct the reapers (13:30a–b). What will he tell the reapers (13:30c–d)?

This means we must live among *weeds*, or sinful people, on this earth. This is not the age of judgment; it is the age of evangelism. That’s why, the night before His crucifixion, Jesus does not ask God to take His followers out of this world (Jn 17:15a). Instead, what does our Lord pray (17:15b)?

In this parable, Jesus next explains the harvest: “*The harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels*” (13:39b). Jesus says He will tell “*his angels*” to throw the weeds “*into the fiery furnace*” where “*there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*” (13:41–42). The “*fiery furnace*” is the place Jesus also called “*hell*.” “*Weeping and gnashing of teeth*” describes a terrifying scene filled with screaming and excruciating pain.

In our politically-correct culture, many declare all religions lead to the same place. They say a loving God wouldn’t send anyone to hell. Today, someone who teaches and preaches about a literal, burning hell is thought to be an uneducated, unloving, hell-fire and brimstone preacher.

However, Jesus—who is Love incarnate—taught more about a literal, burning hell than anyone else in the Bible. Most of what we know about hell comes from the lips of Jesus. The Greek word translated *hell* is GEENNA (Geh-en’-nah) and is found twelve times in the New Testament. Eleven of those times, the word is uttered by our Lord Himself. Jesus came to earth to suffer and die because hell is real. The word “*saved*” in the Bible means saved from hell.

Jesus declared to Nicodemus that God did not send Him to earth to condemn the world (Jn 3:17a). Why did Jesus come (3:17b)?

In contrast to the *weeds* (unbelievers), Jesus says, “*Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father*” (Mt 13:43b). When Jesus returns, He *will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body* (Philip. 3:21a). When Jesus was *transfigured*, or glorified, before His disciples, *his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light* (Mt 17:2b).

Apparently, when we receive our *glorious* bodies we will share in the Shekinah (shuh kye’-nuh) glory of God. The word “Shekinah” is not in the Bible but occurs frequently in later Jewish writings. It refers to the splendor of God’s presence. After returning from the presence of the Lord on Mount Sinai for forty days, Moses is not well received by the Israelites. Why, according to Exodus 34:30b–c?

Like Moses, in heaven we will radiate the bright glory of God.

To bloom where you are planted, **recognize the weeds, reflect on the harvest, and ...**

### **Reach out in your field (13:43c)**

Jesus concludes this parable as He did the previous one: “*He who has ears, let him hear*” (13:43c). In other words, this parable has personal application for everyone. The basic application is to bloom where you are planted.

God has sown some *good seed* in the public school field. Some are students; others are teachers, administrators, or support staff. We need a lot of *good seed* in the public schools—now more than ever before.

God has planted *good seed* everywhere in the world—construction workers, mechanics, secretaries, executives, accountants, factory workers, law enforcement, firefighters, retirees, etc. As long as we live, regardless of occupation or retirement, what statement of Jesus in John 9:4 must we remember?

God has planted you where you are to influence *weeds* to become *good seed*. Remember, we were all once *weeds*, but because of the influence of someone God planted in our lives, we became *good seed*. In John 20:21c–d, how does Jesus emphasize the fact we are to influence the *weeds*?

Wherever God sows you is His field. He has sent you there to reach out and influence bad seed to become *good seed*.

To bloom where you are planted, **recognize the weeds, reflect on the harvest, and reach out in your field.**



Have you ever been deeply hurt by another person? We all have! It's extremely difficult to forgive someone who hurts us just once. However, what does God expect of us if someone repeatedly hurts us? Peter may have been hurt more than once by the same person. That's probably why he asks Jesus how many times he must forgive someone who sins against him. Then, Peter asks if *seven times* is enough (Mt 18:21).

Peter probably thinks he is being very generous because the rabbis taught a repeat offender should be forgiven three times. So, Peter doubles that and adds one to it, which seems very generous. However, how does Jesus respond (18:22b–c)?

That is 490 times, which means as many times as it takes. Peter's thinking is like ours. Our fallen natures are inclined to keep score; we don't like to think in terms of unlimited forgiveness. However, Jesus says forgiveness should have no limit. Peter is thinking in terms of the Law, but Jesus answers in terms of love. What does the Bible say about love in 1 Corinthians 13:5c–d?

The word translated *resentful*, or “thinketh no evil,” (LOGIZOMAI, log-id'-zo-my) is an accounting term that could be translated “keeps no record of wrongs.” Love doesn't keep score in the area of wrongs. If we keep score, we haven't really forgiven, so we will become *resentful* and bitter.

In response to Peter's question, Jesus tells a parable to explain the need for unlimited forgiveness. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wants to settle accounts with his servants who have borrowed money from him. In the process, one debtor brought before him owes how much (18:24)?

In the Old Testament, a talent was a weight of about seventy-five pounds of silver. However, in the New Testament, a talent was the Roman “talent,” which equaled about 6,000 denarii. One *denarius*, or “penny,” was a typical day's wage for an ordinary laborer (Mt 20:2). Therefore, a talent was about 6,000 working days, or about 19 years' wages. In modern terms, if his average annual income were \$25,000, one talent would be 19 times \$25,000, or \$475,000. So, the servant owes \$475,000 times *ten thousand*, or more than four billion in today's dollars. It would take him approximately 190,000 years to repay his incredible debt.

Since there is no possible way the servant can ever repay the debt, the king orders the man and his entire family be sold as slaves (18:25). Then, after falling on his knees before the king, what does the debtor say (18:26c)?

How ridiculous! There is no way he can ever repay the debt! This parable reveals **three** things to remember when it comes time to forgive.



## Calculate what God has forgiven you (18:27–30)

In response to his servant's plea, the king takes pity on him and forgives the debt the servant could never repay (18:27). When we sin, we need to remember this beautiful picture of God's mercy and love. David was guilty of the sins of adultery and of having Bathsheba's husband killed. However, he prays for God to *have mercy* on him according to God's *steadfast*, or unfailing, *love* (Psa. 51:1).

Like the servant in the parable, we all have a sin debt we cannot possibly repay. Thankfully, our forgiveness is not based on the amount of our sin, but on the limitless amount of God's mercy and love. How does Ephesians 2:4 express this fact?

When we pridefully minimize our own sin debt, which has been forgiven, we will have a hard time forgiving others. People who feel they have been forgiven a great sin debt are very generous in extending their forgiveness to others.

However, this was not the case with this servant. He goes out to find a fellow servant who owes him “*a hundred denarii*,” or “an hundred pence.” Remember, a denarius, or “penny,” was a day's wage for common laborers. So, the second servant owes about three months' wages, a very small amount compared to what the first servant has been forgiven. Yet, the first servant grabs the second servant and begins choking him demanding, “*Pay what you owe*” (18:28).

You might be quick to condemn the first servant, but you may be “choking” someone right now. Not physically, but in your heart, you have your hands around his or her neck, demanding payment of some debt. This is what the Bible calls “bitterness,” which is the result of refusing to forgive. However, what does God command in Ephesians 4:31?

*Bitterness* is first in the list because everything that follows is the fruit of that horrible sin, which results from refusing to forgive.

The second servant falls down and pleads, “*Have patience with me, and I will pay you*” (18:29). This is the same plea with which the first servant begged (18:26). However, the first servant refuses and has the second servant put in prison until he can repay the debt (18:30).

You may have someone in the “prison” of your heart right now. Do you know how to tell if this is true? Every time you think about that person, you get in a bad mood or relive the hurt. How do you get over this?

To learn to forgive, **calculate what God has forgiven you** and ...

## Consider the consequences of refusing to forgive (18:31–35)

When other servants see what happens, they are *greatly distressed* and report the incident to the king. He summons the unforgiving servant and calls him “*wicked*” (18:31–32). There is not a more horrible, diabolical word in the Bible to describe sin. One consequence of refusing to forgive is we become *wicked*.

Because of the man's unwillingness to forgive, the king, "*in anger*," sends "*him to the jailers*" until he can "*pay all his debt*" (18:34). The word translated *jailers*, or "tormentors," literally means "torturers." How does Jesus sum up this parable about forgiveness in verse 35?

Besides making us *wicked*, a second consequence of refusing to forgive is mental and emotional torture. We are tortured by bitterness, which will eat away our happiness, limit our ability to love, and make us miserable. You will never meet a bitter person who is truly happy because one of the first casualties of bitterness is happiness.

More than once Jesus teaches about the seriousness of refusing to forgive. For example, in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray "*forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*" (Mt 6:12). How does He explain what that means in Matthew 6:15?

God will not give us what we refuse to give to others. When we refuse to forgive, we are showing a lack of appreciation for God's unfailing love and mercy in our own lives. God repeatedly warns us about the consequences of refusing to forgive. For example, what does James 2:13a warn?

God demands that we forgive because there are such serious consequences for refusing to forgive. I searched the internet for some good quotes about forgiveness. Here are two I think are really good:

**"Forgiveness is a funny thing. It warms the heart and cools the sting"** (William Arthur Ward, American scholar, pastor, and author, 1921–1994).

**"He who cannot forgive others, breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass ..."** (George Herbert, English poet and clergyman, 1593–1633).

Jesus says you must forgive "*from your heart*" (18:35). That means not just acting like you have forgiven someone. It means you let them out of the "prison" of your heart. You may say, "Tommy, you just don't know how much they hurt me or my family." No, I don't, but I do know Jesus says it is *wicked* to refuse to forgive. I also know what God says in Philippians 4:13. Write it below:

God never commands us to do anything He will not give us the power to do (Eph. 3:20).

Forgiving those who have hurt us is a vital part of a "journey into kingdom living." To learn to forgive, **calculate what God has forgiven you and consider the consequences of refusing to forgive.**

APRIL

## Making a Difference in This World (Matthew 25:14–30)

How many lives do you have to live? Just one, and you are free to choose how you use it. You can waste it or invest it. You are not here by accident. Before you were born, God had a plan for your life to make a difference in this world (Jer. 1:5, Eph. 2:10). In this parable of the talents, Jesus reveals **kingdom living is making a difference in this world**.

Jesus is in Jerusalem and has just told His disciples the dazzling temple there will be destroyed, with not one stone left upon another. The disciples ask Him when this will happen, as well as what the sign of His coming and the end of the age, or world, will be (24:2–3). In the rest of chapter 24, Jesus tells them about the signs of His Second Coming.

He ends this discourse with two parables in Matthew 25, the second of which is the parable of the talents. In this parable Jesus reveals **three** principles for **making a difference in this world**.

### 1. Utilize your gifts (25:14–18)

Jesus begins this parable by saying the kingdom of heaven is like a man preparing to go on a journey. He calls together his servants and entrusts them with his possessions (25:14). The man going on the journey represents God, who owns everything. That's why in 1 Corinthians 10:26, Paul quotes what truth from Psalm 24:1a–b?

God owns everything in this world, including everything we possess. It may be land, a business, money, intellect, abilities, or whatever. Everything belongs to God and is just entrusted to us for a short period of time. Therefore, of what does 1 Timothy 6:7 remind us?

The man going on a journey gives one of his servants “*five talents*,” another “*two*,” and the third only “*one*.” He gives to each according to his “*ability*” (25:15). As we learned earlier, a talent was a large sum of money—6,000 denarii, or about 19 years’ wages for the common laborer.

The first two servants are eager to serve their master and double what was given to them (25:16–17). However, what does the third servant do with his one talent (25:18)?

This parable reveals some of God’s servants are given greater responsibilities than others. Some live longer, some have more abilities, but God expects all to use what He has given them.

The first two servants felt the responsibility of what was entrusted to them. However, the third servant, who received only one talent, chose to hide his money rather than use it to increase His master’s possessions. We are all on this earth with the same general purpose. God has entrusted us with certain gifts, or spiritual endowments (1 Pet. 4:10), with which we are to increase His kingdom, which means reaching people. In Matthew 4:19b, how does Jesus express His expectation of everyone who follows Him?

We don't follow Jesus to make God or His followers rich, but to increase the value of His kingdom with people. God wants us to use our abilities and gifts to reach men, women, boys, and girls for Christ. Therefore, to make a difference in this world, **utilize your gifts** and ...

## 2. Visualize accounting day (25:19–23)

Jesus says, “*after a long time*” the master of the servants returns and calls each to give an account of how his money was used. The servant who was entrusted with *five talents* brings *five talents more* (25:19–20). Look at what his lord says to him: “ ‘*Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master*’ ” (25:21).

The second servant, who received only *two talents*, brings back four talents. His lord gives him the same commendation (25:22–23). Although he was entrusted with less than half as much as the first, the second servant was equally faithful. He wasn't jealous of the one given much more and didn't make excuses. You see, it's not how much we have that determines our faithfulness. How does Jesus express this truth in Luke 16:10a–b?

If we are not *faithful* with the small things God entrusts to us, we would not be faithful if God gave us much more. If you don't give back to God and tithe when you don't have much money, you wouldn't do so if God blessed you with the riches of Solomon or Bill Gates. If you don't use your influence at school, work, civic organizations, etc. for Christ, you wouldn't do it if you were the most influential, powerful person on earth.

It's important to notice the man who returned with four talents was given the very same commendation and reward as the man who brought back ten. That's because we are not held accountable for the amount of the return but for being faithful with what God has entrusted us.

God will not judge me by the size of the church I pastor, the number of Bible studies I have written, or how many people I win to Christ. He will judge me by how faithful I have been to use the gifts He has given me. Quoting from Psalm 62:12 and Proverbs 24:12, what does Paul write in Romans 2:6 about accounting day?

Our reliability will be judged, not our ability. Our *works* are what we do with the gifts God has given us.

To make a difference in this world, **utilize your gifts, visualize accounting day**, and ...

## 3. Realize doing nothing is wickedness (25:24–30)

The third servant who received only *one talent* comes forward and says his master is a “ ‘*hard man,*’ ” which means difficult to please. He also says his master reaps crops he didn't sow and gathers where he didn't plant.

Therefore, the servant says he was afraid and hid his master's talent in the ground. The third servant then offers his one talent back to his master (25:24–25). The master responds with a scathing rebuke. What does he call his servant (25:26b)?

As mentioned in the last lesson, the word translated *wicked* (PONĒROS, pon-ay-ros') is the strongest word used in the Bible to describe sin. It includes evil, degeneracy, and viciousness. It is so strong Jesus seldom used it. He didn't call the women caught in adultery *wicked*. He didn't call the Romans soldiers who nailed Him to the cross *wicked*. However, He calls this third servant *wicked*.

Why? Because by his own admission, the third servant knew what was expected of him and chose not to do it. How does James 4:17 describe this?

This is called the "sin of omission." You don't have to be a murderer, rapist, drug dealer, prostitute, or thief to be *wicked*. You can come all dressed up to worship services every Sunday, listen to a biblical sermon, and still be sinful. This is because it is sin to know what God wants you to do with your time, talent, or treasure, and then refuse to do it.

The master also calls the third servant *slothful*, or lazy (25:26b). Like this *wicked* servant, lazy people are always good at giving excuses. Using the third servant's own words, the master says, " *You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed?* " (25:26c).

That should have motivated the servant to invest the talent. If the servant had just a little faithfulness, the master says he would have invested his money with the bankers, and at least made some interest, or "usury." Since the third servant did nothing, the master orders his talent be taken from him and given to the one who has ten talents (25:27–28). Then, Jesus gives us the main point of this parable: " *For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away* " (25:29)

Then, Jesus says the wicked servant was cast into "outer darkness," where " *there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth* " (25:30), which refers to the place of unrelieved agony the Bible calls "hell." This judgment results from the third servant being *wicked* because he did nothing. He was never really committed to his *master*, or "lord." Jesus says not everyone who calls Him " *'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven* " (Mt 7:21a–b). Then, who does He say will enter (7:21c)?

True believers are *good and faithful* servants who do God's will. When Christ returns, will your life prove to have been a good investment for God's kingdom? This parable reveals that if you are truly committed to Christ, you will use your abilities, assets, and aspirations to make a difference in this world for Him.

To make a difference in this world, **utilize your gifts, visualize accounting day, and realize doing nothing is wickedness.**

Do you love Jesus as much as you should? Of course not! No one does. Therefore, you need to love Him more, which is part of the lifelong process the Bible calls “sanctification” (Rom. 6:22; 1 Thess. 4:3). In the parable of the two debtors, Jesus reveals how to love Him more. This parable is found only in the book of Luke. Luke records twenty-eight of Jesus’ parables. Seventeen are not found in the other gospels, including some of His most famous: The Good Samaritan, The Prodigal Son, and The Rich Man and Lazarus.

Jesus tells the parable of the two debtors early in His Galilean ministry. Because of His growing popularity, Jesus is experiencing hostility from the Pharisees. They try to discredit him with accusations. For example, of what does Jesus say He is accused in Luke 7:34c–e?

(Note: The anointing that initiated this parable is not the same anointing that occurred at Bethany, in Judea, when Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, anointed Jesus just before His crucifixion (Jn 12:1–11).

From this parable, we find that **loving Jesus more** requires **three** actions.

### Recognize your sinfulness (7:36–38)

With ulterior motives, Simon, one of the *Pharisees*, wants to know more about Jesus. Therefore, he invites Jesus to have dinner with him. Jesus goes to Simon’s home and takes His place at the table (7:36). In the ancient East, people did not sit while eating, as we do in the West. They reclined on couches, with their heads near the table.

Simon is a Pharisee, which means “separated one.” The Pharisees are a group of Jews committed to keeping Mosaic Law. In Luke 18, Jesus describes the self-righteous attitude of the average Pharisee. When one Pharisee went to the temple, he prayed: “ ‘*God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector* (18:11). What else does Jesus say a Pharisee would pray (Lk 18:12)?

Today, we have a very low opinion of Pharisees. However, in Jesus’ day they were highly respected because they were considered very religious and moral.

As Simon’s group of distinguished friends are having dinner, a woman in that city, *a sinner* (probably a prostitute), hears Jesus is eating at Simon’s house. So, she comes to his house, bringing an expensive *alabaster* jar, which is a white, or transparent, form of gypsum with decorative carving. The jar is filled with very expensive perfume (7:37). At Jewish dinners, when a rabbi was present, people were allowed to come in and listen. Because of this woman’s reputation, she is not necessarily welcome among such respected people. Therefore, her coming requires great courage.

The woman stands at Jesus’ feet and begins to weep. She then kneels, washes His feet with her tears, and wipes them with her hair. Next, she kisses His feet and puts her expensive perfume on them (7:37–38). Not only does she bring Jesus the most precious possession she has, she also brings the only sacrifices God desires. What are they, according to Psalm 51:17a–b?

Perfume was typically used for anointing the head. However, this woman apparently feels unworthy to touch the head of the Lord Jesus because she knows she is a sinner. Yet, many people who go to church every Sunday are worse sinners than this woman because they will not admit their sinfulness. To love Jesus more, **recognize your sinfulness** and ...

### **Refuse to be self-righteous (7:39–43)**

The room is filled with silence as Simon's distinguished guests sit stunned that such a woman would touch a Jewish man, making him unclean. Simon thinks to himself: "*If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner*" (7:39b–d). Not only does Simon feel superior to this woman, but to Jesus as well. Jesus knows who is touching him, as well as what Simon is thinking, because He is God in flesh and blood. What does Psalm 139:2 reveal about God?

At this very moment, the Lord knows where you are sitting (or standing) and what you are thinking. Are your thoughts like the sinful woman's or the prideful Simon's? I don't know—no one does; but the Lord knows.

Knowing his thoughts, Jesus tells Simon He has something to say to him. Simon arrogantly tells Him to say it. Then, Jesus tells a parable about a moneylender who had *two debtors*. One owed him *five hundred denarii*, or "pence," (about two years' wages), while the other owed him *fifty* (about two months' wages), or one tenth as much. When neither could pay, the lender kindly forgave them both, canceling their debts (7:40–42b). What does Jesus then ask Simon (7:42c)?

Seeing the point, Simon begrudgingly answers, "*The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.*" With his answer, Simon is placed in the position of judging himself. Therefore, Jesus responds, "*You have judged rightly*" (7:43).

Simon couldn't admit his sinfulness because he was self-righteous, a result of pride and arrogance. What does God declare in Psalm 101:5b?

Self-righteous people cannot have a relationship with God, much less love Jesus more. To love Jesus more, **recognize your sinfulness, refuse to be self-righteous**, and ...

### **Reflect on the meaning of being *forgiven* (7:44–50)**

Jesus turns toward the woman still kneeling at His feet and tells Simon to look at her. Jesus then points out Simon's rudeness by refusing to extend to Him the common courtesies of the day when He entered his house. Simon intentionally offered *no water* to wash the dust from Jesus' sandaled feet. He did not give Jesus the customary *kiss* of greeting on His cheek, nor did he *anoint* Jesus' head with oil. In contrast, Jesus says the sinful woman washed His feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. She also kissed His feet repeatedly (7:44–46). Then, Jesus says to Simon, "*her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much*" (7:47a–c).



**Loving Jesus more** results from understanding how much we *are forgiven*. A young woman in our church has a personalized car tag that reads “4GIVN.” That sums up what it means to be a Christian. The degree to which we understand the word *forgiven* determines our love for the Lord Jesus. In contrast, what does Jesus say in the last phrase of verse 47?

Simon and his group of dignified guests are even more shocked when Jesus says to the woman, “*Your sins are forgiven*” (7:48b). The word translated *forgiven* (APHIEMI, uh-fee’-ay-mee) means “to send away” or “cast away.” How does Micah 7:19c describe what it means to be forgiven?

The deepest part of the ocean is the Mariana Trench in the western Pacific Ocean. At its deepest point, it is about 36,000 feet (or 6.8 miles) deep. If Mount Everest, the highest mountain on earth at 29,030 feet, were dropped into the deepest part of the Mariana Trench, there would be almost 7,000 feet (more than a mile of water) left above it. The pressure at the deepest part of the Mariana Trench is over one thousand times the standard atmospheric pressure at sea level. No one can go to the bottom of the Mariana Trench because of the tremendous pressure. When we are *forgiven*, God casts our sins where no one can ever retrieve them. They are forever “sent away.”

It wasn’t her tears, her perfume, or her loving display that caused this woman to be completely *forgiven*. What did Jesus say *saved* her (7:50b–c)?

Her tears and loving acts simply demonstrate her saving *faith* by God’s grace (Eph. 2:8). Jesus’ final words to the woman are “*go in peace*” (7:50c). This means *go in peace* with God. Jesus wants her to know she no longer has to bear the burden of guilt for her sins. The result of experiencing God’s forgiveness through *faith* is *peace*. Therefore, what does Peter write in 2 Peter 1:2?

The more you reflect on and understand the meaning of being *forgiven*, the more you will love Jesus and *peace* will *be multiplied to you*.

To love Jesus more, **recognize your sinfulness, refuse to be self-righteous, and reflect on the meaning of being *forgiven*.**

## Practicing Kingdom Living (Luke 10:25–37)

Now we come to one of Jesus' most famous parables, The Good Samaritan. In this parable, Jesus reveals the basic and most important component of kingdom living. We don't know the context of this parable, but it was probably a teaching situation because *a lawyer stood up* (10:25a). The Jewish *lawyer* is an expert in the Law of Moses. This well-educated expert wants to discredit Jesus by asking Him a question. Intending to trap Jesus, what does he ask Jesus (10:25b)?

That's an excellent question! Our Lord throws the question right back at the lawyer by asking, "*What is written in the Law?*" *How do you read it?* (10:26). Quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, the lawyer answers that you must love God with all your "*heart ... soul ... strength ... and ... mind.*" Then, from Leviticus 19:18, he adds: "*and your neighbor as yourself*" (10:27).

That's a brilliant answer because it sums up everything the Old Testament teaches. However, this expert in the Law doesn't understand or practice his answer. Our Lord accepts the lawyer's answer by saying, "*You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live*" (10:28). In other words, biblical knowledge is not enough; we must practice it, too.

Everyone knew the Jews didn't love everyone. Therefore, trying to *justify himself*, what does the lawyer ask (10:29c)?

To answer this question, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this parable, Jesus reveals what is required to practice kingdom living.

### Evaluate your schedule (10:30–32)

This parable has four main characters who are all travelers. Jesus describes the first by saying a man is traveling "*down from Jerusalem to Jericho*" (10:30b). What happens to him (10:30c–d)?

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was about seventeen miles long, descending over 3,000 feet. The road was very dangerous because it curved through rocky, desolate terrain, giving robbers perfect hiding places.

The victim of this robbery would surely die if no one helped him, which brings us to the second character. Jesus continues, "*Now by chance a priest was going down that road*" (10:31a). Priests served on a rotation basis in the temple at Jerusalem. Many of them lived in Jericho. There were two requirements for being a priest. A man had to be from the tribe of Levi and in the line of Aaron, the first High Priest.

Since the priest was also *going down*, he also was traveling from Jerusalem, where he probably had been offering sacrifices in the temple. Today, he would be like a church staff member going home from a worship service. What does Jesus say about the priest (10:31b)?

He may have thought, “I’m a priest, not a nurse or a paramedic.” Or maybe, “I have to get home and do my quiet time.” Whatever his twisted logic, he leaves the man to die.

Jesus says the third traveler is a “*Levite*” (10:32a), who is a lay person in the temple. They also were from the tribe of Levi, but not in the line of Aaron. They were assigned to assist the priests, as well as care for and maintain the temple. Today, they would be deacons, Sunday school teachers, Bible study leaders, musicians, custodians, or anyone who serves in the church but is not a pastor. What does Jesus say about the *Levite* (10:32)?

The *priest* and *Levite* certainly didn’t look at themselves as bad people. They just considered themselves to be busy people. They had full schedules. Both knew the Law of Moses. However, **knowing** what the Bible says is not the most important thing. It is **doing** it! The apostle John asks a rhetorical question about a person who has this *world’s goods* and sees his brother or sister in need. What does he ask (1 John 3:17)?

As a pastor, I am as guilty as anyone of thinking I am too busy to practice kingdom living. I still sometimes get upset when someone interrupts my morning Bible study time. Many times I have to remind myself of what I once heard at a pastor’s conference that changed my attitude about interruptions: “I used to get upset about interruptions to my work until I realized the interruptions are my work.” Now, I try to leave room in my schedule for those “kingdom living” interruptions. **Evaluate your schedule** to see if it is too full for kingdom living. Then ...

### **Emulate Jesus (10:33–35)**

Jesus says a fourth traveler, “a *Samaritan*,” comes along and sees the injured man (10:33a–c). Samaritans were descendants of the ten northern tribes of Israel who intermarried with Gentiles during the Assyrian captivity. They lived in Samaria between Galilee and Judea. Jews, who saw themselves as pure descendants of Abraham, considered Samaritans as half-breed traitors. Jews despised and even hated the Samaritans. The animosity was so great they would walk miles out of their way to avoid going through Samaria when traveling between Galilee and Judea. However, unlike the pillars of the Jewish religion, what does the Samaritan do (10:33)?

The word *compassion* means sympathy for the suffering or hurting of others. It also includes having a desire to help. Therefore, the despised Samaritan goes over to the man, disinfects his wounds with *wine*, soothes them with olive *oil*, and bandages them. Then, he puts the helpless man in his “SUV” (donkey) and takes him to the nearest motel. The next day he gives “*two denarii*” (two days’ wages) to the innkeeper (10:34–35a). What does the Samaritan then tell the innkeeper (10:35)?

What was the difference between the *priest*, the *Levite*, and the *Samaritan*? One word, *compassion*! *Compassion* makes us more like Jesus (Mt 9:36).

This week you will pass by some beaten, wounded people. Some will be beaten and wounded because of their finances, some because of a relationship problem, others because of a health problem, etc. Will you be too busy to **emulate Jesus** and show *compassion* by binding up their “wounds” with a compassionate ear and healing words? To practice kingdom living, **evaluate your schedule, emulate Jesus, and ...**

## Cultivate *mercy* (10:36–37)

After telling the parable, Jesus reverses the lawyer's question about who his neighbor is. He asks the expert in Mosaic Law which of the three who saw the beaten, helpless man "*proved to be a neighbor*" (10:36). This forces the expert in the Law to answer his own question. He can't bring himself to say "the Samaritan." Therefore, what does he say (10:37b)?

*Mercy* is the meaning of this parable. Therefore, we must know what the word *mercy* means in this context. The word translated *mercy* (ELEOS, el'-uh-os) means the manifestation of *compassion*. *Compassion* is the emotion; *mercy* is the action taken because of *compassion*. *Mercy* is compassionate love in action.

Finally, Jesus tells the expert in the Law, "*You go, and do likewise*" (10:37c). This command applies to all who follow Jesus. Jesus never commands us to do anything He will not enable us to do. We can cultivate *mercy* and practice kingdom living, which is love in action. Why, according to Romans 5:5b?

To cultivate *mercy*, never grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30) by passing by on the other side of the road and ignoring a legitimate human need. Every time you respond to legitimate human needs, you cultivate *mercy*. Jesus gives us the greatest possible motivation for showing *mercy*. What does He say in Matthew 5:7? Personalize it below:

Do you think you will need a lot of *mercy* at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10)? I know I will!

To practice kingdom living, **evaluate your schedule, emulate Jesus, and cultivate *mercy*.**

## How To Avoid Being a Fool (Luke 12:13–21)

In America, we live in a time that has been called “the age of obsession with possessions.” On our currency is the slogan “In God We Trust.” A more accurate motto would be “In **This** God We Trust.” No parable speaks more to our “obsession with possessions” than Jesus’ parable of the rich farmer. In this parable, Jesus reveals that a person obsessed with possessions is a fool. As Jesus continues to teach about kingdom living, He tells us **how to avoid being a fool**, beginning with ...

### Beware of greed (12:13–15)

As Jesus teaches a crowd of thousands (12:1), someone in the crowd says to Him, “*Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me*” (12:13). The Old Testament addresses most situations concerning inheritance (Num. 26–27, 33:54, Deut. 21:17). However, sometimes a situation would arise that needed intervention and would be brought to a rabbi for a settlement.

Jesus refuses to be drawn into the dispute by saying, “*Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?*” (12:14). Instead, He uses the incident as an opportunity to teach his followers about the dangers of greed. He begins with one of His most famous warnings: “*Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness* (12:15a). Then, what does our Lord say (12:15b)?

The word translated *covetousness* can also be translated “greed” (NASB, HCSB, NIV). Greed is a consuming desire to have more of something, such as money, than is actually needed. Kingdom living has nothing to do with wealth or monetary prosperity. Greed is the essence of what is called the “prosperity gospel” that has taken our American Christian culture by storm. It spiritualizes selfishness and greed. Its “prophets for profit” use such phrases as “seed money” and “God wants you to be rich.” How does 2 Peter 2:3a warn us against such false teaching?

Jesus explains that our worth is not measured by our *possessions* (12:15b). Our value is not determined by our net worth. If we don’t understand this, we will be consumed with greed. Greed is such a wicked sin Jesus tells a parable to warn against it. Did Jesus ever tell a parable to warn about adultery? No! Did He ever tell a parable to warn against drunkenness? No! But He does tell a parable to warn us about greed. Why? Because it is such a subtle, deceptive sin! Greed has been correctly listed among “The Seven Deadly Sins.”

To avoid being a fool, **beware of greed** and ...

### Be ready to die (12:16–20)

To illustrate the dangers of greed, Jesus tells the parable of a rich farmer. The land of a rich farmer produces such a great harvest he doesn’t have enough room to store his crops (12:16–17).

Therefore, he says to himself, “*I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods*” (12:18).

There is nothing wrong with his wealth. The problem is his attitude toward it. There is nothing wrong with having a lot of possessions, as long as your possessions don’t possess you. When our possessions possess us, we are like the rich farmer who thought only of how he could hoard his crops and use them exclusively for his own benefit and enjoyment. This is clear by the number of times the farmer uses the personal pronouns “I” and “my” in verses 17–18. How many? Nine times! Therefore, what does this greedy, rich farmer say to himself (12:19)?

Since the rich farmer is totally focused on the here and now, he wants to live it up. God wants us to plan for the future. He wants us to invest wisely and be prepared for retirement. However, God doesn’t want us to forget from whom all our blessings come.

Success and riches give the rich farmer the illusion he is in control of his life. Therefore, what does God call him (12:20a)?

The rich farmer is the only person Jesus calls a *fool*. In the Bible, people aren’t called fools because of their intellectual inferiority. It is quite obvious this is a successful farmer with business savvy. Most often, the word *fool* refers to someone who disregards God, as in this parable, or who doesn’t believe in Him. For example, what does Psalm 14:1a–b declare about a *fool*?

You don’t have to say *there is no God* to be an atheist; you just have to live that way. This is what the Bible calls “greed.” Only a fool lives as if this life is all there is.

Then, God tells him that very night his soul will be *required* of him, which means he will die (12:20b). The word translated *required* (APAITEŌ, ap-ah-teh’-oh) refers to a loan that has come due. God has loaned each of us a life, and at any time, as with the rich farmer, He can demand it back.

When God requires the life of the greedy, rich farmer, He asks him a penetrating question: ‘ “*and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?*” ’ (12:20c). In other words, what is going to happen to all this wealth you have accumulated?

Dr. Bobby Burt, one of my former associate pastors, told me about a pastor friend who, for a super price, ordered a suit through the local funeral director. There was only one problem. When the pastor got the suit, he discovered it didn’t have any pockets. It was made for dead people, who don’t need pockets. When you die, you won’t need pockets in your burial clothes because you didn’t bring anything into the world and you won’t take anything out (1 Tim. 6:7)

To avoid being a fool, **beware of greed, be ready to die**, and ...

## **Be spiritually rich (12:21)**

Jesus applies the parable by saying, “*So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God*” (12:21). The last three words reveal **how to avoid being a fool** by being *rich toward*

*God*, or accumulating spiritual riches. A fool spends all his time storing up *treasure for himself* and neglects becoming *rich toward God*. Being *rich toward God* includes giving back to God. Therefore, what does Proverbs 3:9 tell us?

When we give our tithes and offerings, we are showing *honor* to God. We are also reminding ourselves who gives us the ability to gain wealth (Deut 8:18a–b).

Being rich toward God is also being generous to those in need. Referring to what believers are to be taught, what does Paul write in 1 Timothy 6:18?

When we do that, the next verse says we are *storing up treasure* for the *future*, or heaven (1 Tim. 6:19).

Where we give and how much we give reveals how much we are *storing up treasure* in heaven. Later in this chapter, Jesus expresses this fact (Lk 12:34). Personalize it, and write it below:

Our attitude toward possessions reveals the true priorities of our hearts. Kingdom living and greed are mutually exclusive.

To avoid being a fool, **beware of greed, be ready to die, and be spiritually rich.**



Now we come to one of the most important components of kingdom living. What comes to mind when you think about God? Do you picture a harsh judge, anxiously waiting in heaven to punish anyone who does something wrong? Do you think of a grumpy, old “killjoy”? Nothing influences our lives like what enters our minds when we think about God. More than anything else, what you believe God to be like determines the kind of Christian you are. One of the best descriptions in the Bible of God is in Psalm 103:8. Write it below:

To illustrate the truth of that verse, Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep. This parable will cause us to have the right thoughts about God so we will make Jesus rejoice. There are at least **two** requirements.

### Remember why Jesus came (15:1–4)

Jesus tells this parable because *tax collectors and sinners* were coming to hear Him teach (15:1). Jesus always attracts the “down and out” and the outcasts. The *tax collectors*, or “publicans,” were among the most despicable people to the Jews. They were hated because they were Jews who collected taxes for the Roman government to finance the oppression of Israel. To cause even more hatred, they collected more taxes than the government required and pocketed the excess. The *sinner*s were probably people known for lifestyles of sin and disregarding the Law of Moses.

*The Pharisees and the scribes* complain that Jesus associates with these sinful people and even *eats with them* (15:2). The *Pharisees* were a religious political party who lived by the letter of Mosaic Law, as interpreted by the *scribes*. The *scribes* were respected, authoritative teachers of the Law of Moses. We read about the most famous scribe in the Bible when *Artaxerxes* (art-uh-zerk’-sees), king of Persia, writes a letter. How does the introduction of that letter begin in Ezra 7:12b–c?

The *Pharisees and scribes* were the most respected Jews, but they had the wrong view of God. By criticizing Jesus, they gave Him His greatest compliment and the Gospel in a nutshell: “*This man receives sinners*” (15:2b).

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day didn’t understand Him because they had the wrong concept of God. Therefore, in response to the criticism, Jesus tells a parable. Since sheep herding was one of the most common occupations in the Holy Land, Jesus asks a question anyone could answer. He asks, if a man has a *hundred sheep* and one of them is *lost*, doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine to go and search until he finds the one that is *lost* (15:4)? Jesus knew everyone in His audience would agree the shepherd would search until he found the wayward lamb.

The emphasis of this parable is not the lost sheep; it is the seeking shepherd. In its essence, the Gospel is the Shepherd seeking lost sheep. A better title for this parable would be “The Seeking Shepherd.” Therefore, reaching lost people is to be the top priority of kingdom living. There are

more lost people in the world today than when Jesus died on the cross. The main reason is we have forgotten why Jesus came. However, Jesus tells us very clearly in Luke 19:10. Explain below:

To make the Lord rejoice, **remember why Jesus came** and ...

### **Reflect on why Jesus wants you to remain (15:5–7)**

When we think of God, we should think of the seeking Shepherd and His reaction when a lost person is found, or saved. In Jesus' parable, when the shepherd finds the lost sheep, he lays it on his shoulders, *rejoicing* (15:5). He doesn't beat or drag the sheep back to the flock. He lovingly puts it on his shoulders and carries it back to the flock. When the shepherd arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors. What does he say to them (15:6)?

Jesus pictures a person in this world without God as *lost*. What does that mean? The word translated *lost* (APOLŌLOS, uh-pol'-oh-los) means "to perish" or "to destroy." This means a person without Christ will perish and be destroyed.

Earlier, Jesus sent out seventy-two of His followers in thirty-six teams, to reach the multitudes. He said to them, "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few*" (Lk 10:2a). Then, Jesus says something critically important in the rest of that verse. What does He say (10:2b)?

Before Jesus sends them out, He tells them to pray for the *harvest*. As someone has said, "The reason we don't talk to our friends about the Lord is we don't talk to the Lord about our friends." Also, we should not pray for our friends to be saved unless we are willing to be part of the answer—to put "feet" to our prayers.

When the seventy-two return to celebrate their victories from praying and then harvesting souls, the response of Jesus is very important. What does He do (10:21a)?

This is the only time in the Bible that Jesus is recorded as rejoicing. Therefore, what makes Jesus rejoice? When we faithfully pray for and seek to win the lost.

Jesus explains the purpose of this parable: "*Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance*" (15:7). While there is certainly *joy* over those already in the kingdom, there is *more joy* for each *lost* person who comes to Christ.

A major part of kingdom living is doing what makes our Lord rejoice. What can you do this week to make Jesus rejoice? Pray for and seek lost sheep! Don't be condescending by saying, "turn or burn" or "die and fry." Just be their friend; then—and not before—share the Gospel with them, or invite them to Bible study or worship services to hear God's powerful, life-changing Word.

After more than forty years as a pastor, I have learned I can't change anyone, not even my wife or children. But the Word of God can. If you persuade your lost relatives, friends, neighbors, and

associates to sit under the teaching and preaching of God's Word, the Lord will do the rest. God promises His Word will not return *empty*, or "void" (Isa. 55:11a–b). What does God promise in the remainder of that verse?

To reach the lost, we must encourage them to come and hear God's Word. Then, the Holy Spirit will draw them to Christ. The problem isn't the message, it's the messengers.

LifeWay Research and the North American Mission Board (NAMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention did a study of unchurched people. They found that sixty-three percent of unchurched people would respond positively to an invitation from a friend or neighbor to attend church services (LifeWay Research: *Americans Open to Outreach*, by David Roach).

This means about two-thirds of the people you know who don't attend church would come, if you invite them in the right way. The right way is laying the groundwork first. Share with them how important and helpful your church is to you and your family. Plant seeds before you try to harvest the fruit.

Why does Jesus want us to remain on earth after we are saved? Why doesn't He just take us on to heaven? There are only two things you can't do in heaven that you can do here on earth. What are they? One is sin! The other is win lost people. After we are saved, which of these two things do you think God leaves us on this earth to do? How does Jesus answer that question in Mark 16:15?

To make Jesus rejoice, **remember why Jesus came and reflect on why Jesus wants you to remain.**

## SEPTEMBER    When You've Wandered Away From God    (Luke 15:11–25)

**H**ave you ever wandered away from God? Do you know someone who has? This parable is usually called “The Prodigal Son.” However, the main teaching of the parable concerns the reaction of the father (who represents God) when his prodigal son returns home. A better name might be “The Forgiving Father.” This great parable teaches us how our heavenly Father reacts when we come back to Him. There are **three** things to consider **when you’ve wandered away from God**.

### Contemplate the results (15:11–16)

In this parable, a father has two sons. The younger son tells his father: “ ‘*Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me*’ ” (15:11–12b). In essence, he is saying, “Old man, I can’t wait for you to die; I want my inheritance now.”

The father, who represents God, divides his property between his two sons. The younger son gathers all he has, which probably means he converts all his inheritance into cash. Then, he takes “ ‘*a journey into a far country*’ ” (15:12c–13b). In other words, he goes to a non-Jewish country filled with pagan religions and sexual immorality. There he squanders his inheritance in “ ‘*reckless living*’ ” (15:13c). The phrase *reckless*, or “*riotous*,” (ASŌTŌS, uh-so’-toce) literally means “loose.” He lives a wild life, spending his inheritance on drunken parties, sex orgies, or whatever he chooses. What does his bitter, older brother later tell his father about the younger son’s behavior (15:30b)?

This all happens because the younger son wants to live his life his way. So, he rebels and distances himself as far as possible from his father and his family. In its essence, sin wants us to live at a distance from our heavenly Father. Sin is fun! Sin is appealing because it is fun—at least for a short while. The devil can lead us into sin if we only think of the temporary pleasures and forget the long-term pain. We need to think like Moses. What does Hebrews 11:25 record about him?

Sin is fun for a short season; if it weren’t, no one would want to sin. Rebellion against God always starts out with fun, friends, and fantasy. However, like the prodigal son’s outcome, sooner or later the consequences arrive. After he spends all his money, a terrible “ ‘*famine*’ ” hits the entire country. To keep from starving, he hires himself out to “ ‘*feed pigs*.’ ” He is so hungry he wants to eat the “ ‘*pods*,’ ” or “husks,” he is feeding the pigs because no one will give him anything (15:14–16). This is the ultimate indignity for a Jewish boy because pigs were unclean and not to be eaten or touched (Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8).

Have you seen a hog pen or “slopped” hogs? There is not a filthier, more stinking place than a hog pen. Referring to people who rebel against God, what warning is found in Hosea 8:7a–b?

The prodigal has sown his wild oats and hoped for a crop failure. But now he is reaping his *whirlwind* harvest. When his money runs out, so do his friends. He never intended to end up like this. No one ever does. Over and over again, God warns us about the results of sin because He doesn't want us to end up like the prodigal son. For example, in Numbers 32:23c, what warning does God give through Moses to some of the tribes of Israel?

Sin will find us out in our family, finances, consciences, health, and other places. God doesn't want us to suffer the consequences of sin, but when we rebel, we distance ourselves from Him.

When you wander away from God, **contemplate the results** and ...

### **Articulate words of repentance (15:17–19)**

In the “pigpen” of consequences, the prodigal son comes “*to himself,*” which means he comes to his senses (15:17a). This is just another way of saying he repents. In the Bible, the word “repentance” translates a word meaning a change of mind that leads to a change in behavior. Repentance is more than being sorry for sin; it turns away from sin and lives for God. It always results in a changed life. How does Matthew 3:8 express this?

Like the prodigal son, sometimes people have to live with “the pigs” for a while before they come to their senses and repent. Finally, he says to himself: “*How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!*” (15:17b). Here is an important saying: “You don't change until the pain of continuing as you are exceeds the pain of change.” Sometimes, God lets us endure the pain of the “pigpen” for a long time before we come to our senses and decide to change.

Finally, the prodigal son realizes he is responsible for his actions. He doesn't play the “blame game” and say, “This is my father's fault; he was just too religious and strict.” He doesn't blame his pagan friends. He does what is always in keeping with true repentance; he accepts full responsibility for his sin, with no excuses.

After coming to his senses, the prodigal son says to himself: “*I will arise and go to my father*” (15:18a). What does he know he must say to his father (15:18b)?

The prodigal says three of the hardest words in the world to articulate: *I have sinned*. You don't have to go into details; the Lord knows all about your sin. But you must be willing to sincerely say, *I have sinned*.

Our pride causes us to do almost anything to avoid saying those three words. Also, not only does the prodigal son acknowledge he has sinned against his father but also *against heaven*, a euphemism for “God.” The Jews often used the word *heaven* in place of “God” to avoid ever using God's name in vain. How does Jeremiah 3:13a–b sum up repentance?

The prodigal's repentance is clearly seen in his changed attitude when he decides to say to his father: “*I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants*” (15:19). The phrase “*treat me*” is better translated “make me” (NASB, KJV, HCSB, NIV). He left home saying “give me” and returns saying “make me.” This pictures what the Bible calls “repentance.”

When you wander away from God, **contemplate the results, articulate words of repentance,** and ...

### **Anticipate the reception (15:20–24)**

It is hard to go back home, but the prodigal gets up and goes to his father (15:20a). The best he hopes for is his father taking him back as one of his *hired servants*. However, while he is still a long way off, his father sees him coming home and feels *compassion* for him (15:20b–c). Now, we come to one of the most beautiful word pictures of God in the Bible. The father, who represents God, runs to his prodigal son, throws his arms around his neck, and kisses him (15:20d).

Apparently, the father has been on his front porch, watching and waiting for his son to come home. When he sees him, the father—who represents God—runs to receive his son. This is the only time in the Bible that God is pictured as being in a hurry.

If you have wandered away from God and want to come home, the good news is right now God is on His front porch, watching and waiting for you to come home. How does God describe the reception in Isaiah 44:22?

The prodigal son, no doubt stunned by the compassionate reception, begins his well-rehearsed speech. However, the father interrupts just as his son is about to ask to be a hired servant (15:21). The father tells his servants to do four things. First, “*Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him*” (15:22b). His son is wearing old clothes that smell like pigs. The father doesn't just ask for clean clothes, he asks for *the best robe*, which was always given to the guest of honor at a party or banquet.

Second, the father says: “*put a ring on his hand*” (15:22c). This *ring* was not just a piece of jewelry, but a symbol of authority and being in good standing with the family (Gen. 41:42).

Third, the father says: “*and shoes on his feet*” (15:22d). Slaves and servants usually went barefoot, but family members were never without sandals, or *shoes*. This is what the Negro spiritual means by the words, “I got shoes, you got shoes, all God's children got shoes.”

Finally, the father orders: “*And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate*” (15:23). A *fattened calf* was kept for very special celebrations. What does the father want to celebrate (15:24)?

In this parable of the forgiving father, Jesus promises that no matter what you have done, if you will repent and return to the Lord, you will receive a wonderful reception (Jn 6:37).

When you wander away from God, **contemplate the results, articulate words of repentance, and anticipate the reception.**

## OCTOBER      **Beating Bitterness (Luke 15:25–32)**

**H**ave you ever been treated unfairly by someone? We all have. Our natural reaction is to become bitter and stray from the path of kingdom living. The “thorn” of a past offense then continues to fester when we refuse to let Christ help us remove it.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the older brother has a problem with the sin of bitterness. Bitterness is having strong feelings of hatred, anger, cynicism, and resentment toward someone because of a real or imagined wrong. In this parable, Jesus reveals **three** requirements for **beating bitterness**.

### **Analyze the cause (15:25–28a)**

In our last lesson, the prodigal son has just returned home and is being joyfully welcomed by his loving father (15:20–24). Now, the older brother is returning from the field. As he nears the house and hears music and dancing, he asks one of the servants what is happening. He learns his younger brother has come home and his father is celebrating (15:25–27).

The older brother cannot believe his ears. He is the one who has remained home working in the fields and being faithful to his father. On the other hand, the despicable younger brother has caused his father untold worry, pain, grief, and even shame by squandering his inheritance with prostitutes (15:30). Therefore, how does the older brother respond (15:28a)?

Bitterness is caused by anger. There are three causes of anger: hurt, frustration, and fear (fear someone will take someone or something from you). All three are involved in the older son’s anger. He is frustrated because his faithfulness to his father seems to be unrewarded. He is also hurt and fearful the younger brother will take his place with his father. What command does God give in Psalm 37:8?

The word translated *fret* (HĀRĀ, har-law’) means burning anger. Bitterness always originates with anger. Therefore, **analyze the cause** and ...

### **Realize the consequences (15:28b–30)**



The father comes out and pleads with his older son to come in to the celebration (15:28b). However, the son replies: “ ‘*Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends*’ ” (15:29). Bitter people, like the older brother, are always filled with pride and arrogance about their own goodness. What does God say in Proverbs 8:13b?

Because of his *pride and arrogance*, the older son can see all kinds of wrong in his younger brother and in his father. Therefore, he says to his father: “ ‘*But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!*’ ” (15:30).

The older brother’s bitterness is also seen in the fact he says “ ‘*this son of yours*’ ” rather than “my brother” (15:30). Bitterness always spreads because a bitter person is never bitter toward just one person but also toward anyone who is nice to that person. Therefore, the older son is now bitter toward his father. He is willing to sacrifice his relationship with his father rather than accept his father’s love for his younger brother.

There are at least **three** consequences of bitterness.

**1. Bitterness robs us of joy.** The older brother has no joy in his work or in knowing all his father has left will be his. This is significant because according to Jewish law and tradition, the oldest son would receive twice the inheritance of the younger. Also, the older son would not have to live with the memories of all the sins and hurts of his younger brother. However, his bitterness has robbed him of the joy of all his blessings.

The older brother is a wonderful example of this truth: “It is a simple but forgotten truth that the greatest enemy to present joy and high hopes is the cultivation of retrospective bitterness” (Robert G. Menzies).

**2. Bitterness causes us to self-destruct.** Saul, the first king of Israel, is an excellent example of this. He has everything going for him—good looks, popularity, talent, success, and power. But after the shepherd boy David slays the giant and returns home, the Israelites praise him by singing, “*Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands*” (1 Sam. 18:7b). How does Saul respond (18:8a)?

Saul’s anger then turns into bitterness and eats him up. “Bitterness is like cancer. It eats up the host.” (Maya Angelou). Saul’s bitterness causes him to try to kill David on several occasions. Bitterness muddles Saul’s thinking both militarily and spiritually.

Finally, the Philistines (the arch enemy of Israel) defeat the Israelites in battle. They kill three of Saul’s sons, including Jonathan—a wonderful person and David’s dear friend. As a result, Saul asks his armor-bearer to kill him. According to the last phrase of 1 Samuel 31:4, when his armor-bearer refuses, what does Saul do?

The Philistines didn’t cause Saul’s death; it was his own bitterness that caused him to self-destruct.

**3. Bitterness alienates us from God.** Rather than get rid of his bitterness, the older brother is willing to sacrifice his relationship with his father. That's exactly what we do when we harbor bitterness in our hearts. In Ephesians 4:31, we read: *Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.*

When you see a list in the Bible, always pay special attention to what is first. *Bitterness* is listed first in that verse because all the other sins are results of *bitterness*. *Bitterness* is a horrible sin because it has so many sinful tentacles. *Bitterness* is sin, or iniquity. Therefore, we should remember what fact in Psalm 66:18?

To beat bitterness, **analyze the cause, realize the consequences, and ...**

### **Utilize the cure (15:31–32)**

The father, who is the main character in this parable, reminds the older brother of **three** things that reveal the secrets for **beating bitterness**.

**1. Remember who you are.** The father reminds the son, “ ‘*Son, you are always with me*’ ” (15:31b). The father reminds the bitter, older brother that he is still his “ ‘*son*’ ” and “ ‘*always*’ ” will be. When we are tempted to become bitter, we need to remember who we are. We are the children of God, and we should act like it. We are to *be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation* (Philip. 2:15a–c). Why, according to the last phrase of that verse?

Remembering who you are helps you realize there is no excuse for bitterness toward anyone.

**2. Focus on God's faithfulness.** Don't forget God will give you what you deserve. While the prodigal son has been restored with a homecoming party, the fact remains he has *squandered* his inheritance (15:13). He will receive nothing that belongs to his older brother. Therefore, what does the father, who represents God, say to the bitter brother (15:31c)?

When we see people we think are undeserving succeed or be praised, we sometimes feel cheated and become bitter. However, if we live according to God's will, we will get our just reward, because of God's faithfulness.

**3. Do the right thing.** The father says to the older brother, “ ‘*It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found*’ ” (15:32). The father will not cancel the party because it is the right thing to do. The younger brother's rebellion and sin brought him to ruin. He will receive no more inheritance. When his father dies, he will probably end up working for his older brother.

The older brother needs to realize his life has been and will continue to be much better than his poor, disgraced brother. This one-day celebration will not change that. The celebration is the right thing to do, for it is truly a time of joy for the father and his family.

To utilize the cure for bitterness, **remember who you are, focus on God's faithfulness, and do the right thing.**

This parable has no ending. Jesus doesn't tell us whether or not the older brother comes into the celebration. Jesus leaves that decision up to you. Will you come into the Father's fellowship, or will you stay in the field of bitterness? Before answering, remember Psalm 84:10a. Write it below:

The psalmist continues: *I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents [palaces] of wickedness* (Psa. 84:10b, explanation added).

To beat bitterness, **analyze the cause, realize the consequences, and utilize the cure.**

## NOVEMBER      **What Happens When You Die?** (Luke 16:19–31)

Suppose you died today. What would happen to you? Even though you try to avoid thinking about it, your own death is inevitable. You could die before this lesson is finished. Every day, worldwide almost two people die every second, 107 a minute, and over 6,400 an hour. Over 3,000 will die while you study this lesson. One day, maybe sooner than you think, one of them will be you. That's because of what fact in the last phrase of 1 Samuel 20:3?

Death is only a step, or a heartbeat, away for each of us. What happens then? Jesus tells us in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. He tells this parable because the Pharisees, like a lot of people today, loved money (16:14). This may be a real life story because it is the only time Jesus gives one of His characters a name. This parable is about a trio of two's.

### **Two Men (16:19–21)**

Jesus says the rich man's clothes were “*‘purple and fine linen,’*” which refers to very expensive clothing, such as the wealthy today would buy at an exclusive store. He daily ate “*‘sumptuously,’*” or extravagantly, of the finest food money could buy (16:19). He “showboated” his wealth. He would feel at home with the rich and famous. He was the man the Pharisees would love to be. Being rich is not sinful, but being selfish is. Like the Pharisees, this man loved money. What warning about this obsession is given in 1 Timothy 6:10a?

In contrast, the poor man—named Lazarus—is “*‘covered with sores,’*” probably ulcers. He is “*‘laid’*” at the rich man's gate. He longs to eat the table scraps that fall from the rich man's table (16:20–21a). In ancient times, people used bread as napkins to clean their hands as they ate. The bread would then be thrown on the floor and was usually fed to dogs (Mt 15:27). Lazarus was so weak the dogs would come lick his sores (16:21b).

It would be hard to imagine a greater contrast between two human beings. Economically and socially, they were polar opposites. After introducing us to **two men**, our Lord describes ...

## **Two Destinies (16:22–23)**

When the poor man eventually dies, “*‘angels’*” carry him to Abraham's side (16:22a–b). This is how the Jews referred to heaven and fellowship with believers who have died before them. How does Genesis 35:29a–b describe the death of a child of God?

Therefore, when Lazarus dies, he is gathered to his people in the wonderful place we call “heaven.” The rich man also dies and is gathered to his people. However, he goes to a place Jesus describes like this: “*‘and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side’*” (16:23). The word translated *hades*, or “hell,” (HADES, hay'-dees) is an intermediate place to which the lost go immediately at death. It is the equivalent of the Hebrew word SHEÔL (she-ol'), sometimes translated “grave” or “hell” in the Old Testament.

The Greek word for “hell” (GEENNA, geh'-en-nah), referring to the eternal place of everlasting punishment, is found only twelve times in the Greek New Testament. Eleven of those times it comes from the lips of the Lord Jesus (Mt 5:22, 29, 30, 10:28, 18:9, 23:15, 33, Mk 9:43, 45, 47, & Lk 12:5).

*Hades* is where the dead who are lost wait until the second resurrection and the Great White Throne Judgment of God (Rev. 20:5–6). The Bible speaks only of the first resurrection, but if there is a first, there must be a what? A second! At the second resurrection, *Death and Hades* will give up their dead, and they will be *judged* according to their deeds (Rev. 20:13). After the degree of their eternal punishment is determined, what happens, according to Revelation 20:14?

*Hades* is “hell's waiting room” and is a terrible place. Peter explains: *Then the Lord knows how to ... keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment* (2 Pet. 2:9).

Jesus tells us about **two men, two destinies**, and ...

## Two Requests (16:24–31)

From Hades, the rich man begs Father Abraham to have “‘*mercy*’ ” on him and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue because he is in “‘*anguish*,’ ” or “tormented,” in the flames (16:24).

Abraham tells the rich man his request is impossible to grant because there is a “‘*great chasm*,’ ” or “gulf,” that is “‘*fixed*’ ” by God (16:26). Therefore, the fate of the dead cannot be changed. You have only one life to live. During that time, you must decide where you want to spend eternity. It is too late after a person dies. That’s why we are warned: “*Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts*” (Heb. 4:7d).

The first request is for relief. Then, the rich man makes a second request. He begs Abraham to raise Lazarus from the dead and send him to his father’s house because he has “‘*five brothers*,’ ” He wants Lazarus to warn them, so they will not come to this “‘*place of torment*’ ” (16:27–28).

Don’t miss the implications of this request. The rich man is saying, “I didn’t have a fair chance. God should have done more to warn me about this place. If God raises someone from the dead to warn my brothers, they will change.” Abraham will not entertain this slander on God. Therefore, how does he answer (16:29b–c)?

In other words, the witness of the Bible is enough to convince anyone. The rich man frantically responds, “‘*No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent*’ ” (16:30). That statement makes it clear the rich man knew what he should have done to avoid hell—*repent*. He insists that if someone returns from the dead, his brothers will listen and will *repent*.

There is irony in this request because in Bethany, just days before His crucifixion, Jesus had raised another Lazarus from the dead. Bethany was only six miles from Jerusalem. Many Jews were eyewitnesses to his resurrection, and some believed. However, other Jews go to the Pharisees and tell them Jesus has raised a man from the dead (Jn 11:45–46). The priests and Pharisees call a meeting of the *Council*, or Sanhedrin—the Jewish Supreme Court—which is made up of the leading religious leaders. At this meeting, they decide what to do with Jesus because of the irrefutable evidence of His raising Lazarus from the dead. What do they decide to do (11:53)?

Later, they decide that is not enough, they must also get rid of the evidence. Therefore, the chief priests make plans to kill Lazarus, too (Jn 12:10).

If a person will not believe by reading or hearing the living and powerful Word of God (Heb. 4:12), he or she will not believe because of some miraculous sign, even someone coming back from the dead to warn people (16:31).

Abraham refuses the request, not because he doesn’t care about the brothers, but because it is an insult to God and he knows it would be a waste of time.

If you are only born once, you will have to die twice. The second death is *the lake of fire*, or hell (Rev. 20:14). However, if you are born twice, you will only have to die once. How does Jesus express this fact in John 3:3?

The phrase *born again* literally means “born from above.” In other words, we must be born into God’s kingdom just as we are born into our physical families. Being *born again* is what theologians call “regeneration.” It is the act by which God imparts eternal life through our faith in Christ. Being *born again* is the fulfillment of what prophecy in Ezekiel 36:27a?

When we receive Christ, God puts His Holy Spirit in us. The Spirit then gives us the will and power to live for Him (Eph. 3:20). So, the Holy Spirit is the One who enables us to be successful in kingdom living. What it means to be born again is described in 2 Corinthians 5:17. Explain below:

Jesus wants you to think about **two men, two destinies, and two requests**, so you won’t end up like the rich man in this parable. Today, if you hear God’s voice speaking to your heart, drawing you to Himself, do not harden your heart. Read page six of this study to learn how to avoid the second death.

## DECEMBER      Why Does God Delay Answering My Prayers? (Luke 18:1–8)

**H**ave you ever prayed about something and it seemed God was in no hurry to answer? Some people mistakenly believe, if they just pray the prayer of faith, the answer will come instantly, or at least in a matter of days. However, kingdom living requires understanding that often God’s answers are delayed. What does Jesus teach about prayer in the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1)?

Understanding why God sometimes delays answers to prayers requires **two** actions.

### Read the parable about persistent prayer (18:2–8)

This parable is about a judge who lived in a certain city and neither feared God nor respected or cared about people. Jesus says there was a *widow* in the town who kept saying to him, “‘*Give me justice against my adversary*’ ” (18:2–3). In Bible times, widows were often the most helpless and vulnerable of all people. It is still true today. I saw a report about rip-offs by businesses, such as

overcharging and other forms of financial deception. The top two groups swindled were widows and single mothers. However, what does God command in Exodus 22:22?

In this parable, the judge has no concern for the plight of this poor widow and repeatedly refuses to render her justice (18:4). However, the widow refuses to give up because persistence is her only resource. The judge realizes the widow will not leave him alone. Therefore, he says to himself that because the widow keeps bothering him, he will give her justice. He doesn't want to be worn out with her constant requests (18:5).

The point of the parable is not that God has the same attitude toward us as this judge toward the widow. This is a parable of contrasts. The point of this parable is, if persistence is effective with an unjust judge, how much more will it be effective with God, the righteous Judge?

Jesus says we should learn a lesson from the unrighteous judge (18:6). Even the unjust judge rendered a just decision because of persistence. Therefore, Jesus says, “*‘And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? <sup>8</sup> I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily’*” (18:7–8a). From God's perspective, His justice will come *speedily*. From our perspective, it may seem a long time coming. How does Psalm 90:4 describe God's perspective?

The Jews had three, four-hour night watches: the beginning watch (Lam. 2:19) from sunset till 10 p.m., the middle watch (Judg. 7:19) from 10 p.m. till 2 a.m., and the morning watch (Ex 14:24) from 2 a.m. till sunrise. With God, a thousand years is not even four hours.

Since time is not an issue with God, we must be persistent in prayer. This requires faith because faith waits. That's why Jesus says, “*‘Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’*” (18:8b). Our faith is revealed when we are persistent in prayer and continue to have faith even when God delays the answer. This parable seems to contradict what promise in Isaiah 65:24?

God's answers are always immediate but receiving them is sometimes delayed, as we shall see in the next point. Yet, we still wonder, if God is as anxious to answer our prayers as He promises, why is persistent prayer necessary? Even when we **read the parable about persistent prayer**, that question isn't answered. Therefore, we must look elsewhere in the Bible, and ...

## Research the purpose of persistent prayer

There are at least **two** reasons God delays answering our prayers.

### 1. It refines our prayers

Sometimes we pray for something we don't really need, even though we may think we do at the time. The late Ruth Graham, wife of Billy Graham, said she was very thankful God didn't answer all her prayers or she would have married the wrong man six times.



God delays answering our prayers to give us time to refine our prayers. For example, the prophet Elijah powerfully prays and calls down fire from heaven on Mount Carmel. Then, he flees in terror from the wicked, vindictive queen, Jezebel, who had killed hundreds of God's prophets. Tired and discouraged, what does Elijah pray in the last sentence of 1 Kings 19:4?

Don't you think Elijah's prayer needs a little refinement? Absolutely! Elijah didn't really want to die. If he did, he could have just stayed at Mount Carmel. Jezebel would have been delighted to oblige him. Elijah was just tired, discouraged and looking for a simple, quick way out of his problems.

If God answered all our prayers immediately, we, like Elijah, would self-destruct when we are tired and depressed. Therefore, God wants us to be persistent in our prayers because **it refines our prayers** and ...

## 2. It redirects our plans

An excellent example of this is found in the life of a New Testament couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth. One day while Zechariah, a priest, is burning incense in the temple, an angel appears to him and tells him not to be afraid because his "*prayer has been heard*." His wife Elizabeth is going to have a son. The angel also tells Zechariah what to name the baby (Lk 1:5–13). Zechariah and Elizabeth had been praying for a son for decades. Therefore, what does Zechariah, who is probably in his sixties, ask the angel (1:18)?

After years of what seem to be unanswered prayers, Zechariah was slow to believe God would answer. Persistent prayer gives God time to answer in His way and in His own time. As missionary Jim Elliot once said, "God always gives the best to those who leave the choice with Him." How does Psalm 84:11c verify that statement?

God sometimes delays answering our prayers because He has something much better in mind. Suppose God had answered Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayers with a son years earlier. He would have just been another baby boy and just another man. They would have been just another couple, of whom we have never heard. They just wanted a son like everyone else.

But God had something much better in mind. He wanted to give them a son who would be the last of the Old Testament prophets, the only prophet who lived to see the Messiah. However, most importantly, what does Jesus say about their son, John the Baptist, in Luke 7:28a?

God has a very good reason for every delayed answer to our prayers. Jesus told this parable of the persistent widow to teach us "*'always to pray and not lose heart'*" (Lk 18:1). How does Jesus also emphasize the importance of persistent prayer in Luke 11:9?

The key to understanding any biblical command is the verbs. The verbs in that verse are *ask*, *seek*, and *knock*. They are all present tense, which means continuous action. Therefore, they could be translated, "keep on asking," "keep on seeking," and "keep on knocking."

Praying in faith doesn't mean we get the answer immediately. Praying in faith is really persistent prayer, which means trusting God with the best answer and leaving the timing to Him. How does Psalm 130:5 express this principle?

When the answers to your prayers are delayed, remember to **read the parable about persistent prayer** and **research the purpose of persistent prayer**.

Jesus concludes this parable about prayer: “*‘For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled’*” (18:14b). Arrogant, self-righteous people will ultimately *be humbled* when they stand before God and give account of their lives. On the other hand, Jesus declares, “*‘but the one who humbles himself will be exalted’*” (18:14c).

By God's mercy and grace, we will be exalted from sinners to saints and from hell to heaven. How does 1 Peter 5:6 express this fact?

To get your prayers answered in your “journey into kingdom living,” **avoid arrogance, ask humbly**, and. “*‘For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled’*” (18:14b). Arrogant, self-righteous people will ultimately *be humbled* when they stand before God and give account of their lives. On the other hand, Jesus declares, “*‘but the one who humbles himself will be exalted’*” (18:14c).

By God's mercy and grace, we will be exalted from sinners to saints and from hell to heaven. How does 1 Peter 5:6 express this fact?

To get your prayers answered in your “journey into kingdom living,” **avoid arrogance, ask humbly**, and **anticipate God's loving answer**.