

and Luke, is the Olivet Discourse, the sermon delivered by Jesus on the Mount of Olives just before his crucifixion. He sat there with his disciples and looked out over the city of Jerusalem and knew that was near. And in the most amazing terms he described what would happen in the centuries that followed when nation would rise against nation, and wars, famines, and earthquakes would characterize the period. Eventually, he said, a world government would develop, headed by a great leader who would call himself as God and the world would follow after him. Then God would bring about a time of great tribulation such as the world had never seen from its beginning till its end. At the end of that time Jesus would return again for all the earth to see and would establish his kingdom. That passage is well known and you will find it in Matthew 24 and 25.

But I want to turn now to the other passage, which occurs earlier in Matthew. We might call it the Sea Sermon. Jesus gave three great messages which are recorded in Matthew: The Sermon on the Mount (Chapters 5-7), the Sermon on the Sea (Chapter 13), and the Olivet Discourse (Chapters 24-25). The passage in Matthew 13 is less well-known. The Olivet Discourse consists of seven parables which our Lord told all in one day. In them he traces not the events of history but the principles which affect human life during what we call the present age, the age between his comings.

I propose that we study these great parables very carefully, relating them to their corresponding human history. So we are not finished with history in the Bible yet. We are going to look at history in the light of what Jesus has revealed will be the governing factors of human life during this period. We will see things then as God sees it. All of us are familiar with history as man sees it -- the rather meaningless jumble of wars and empires, presidents and wars, discoveries, betrayals and exploitations, etc., which constitute the record of history. That is, at best, a very twisted and distorted view of history. But in these parables we want to look at God's view of history, at the great, meaningful, effective forces which are at work in human lives to bring about the events that we see recorded in our newspapers and history books. The Olivet Discourse parables began on a very eventful day when Jesus had been teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. As he tells us,

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat there; and the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, {Matt 13:1-3a RSV}

We are not going to study the parables today. Beginning next week we will take them one by one and give the whole message to each.

Notice the very beautiful natural setting that Matthew records for us. It is on the northern shore of Galilee, not very far from the scene of our Lord's first great message on the Mount of Olives. Jesus has come out of the synagogue at Capernaum and gone down to the beach, and great crowds have gathered. Matthew does not tell us how many people but it must have been well up into the thousands. They were drawn by the power that our Lord has displayed, and by the wisdom of his words, and they are ready to do anything more. In order to be able to address them he pushes out from shore in a boat and there he begins to teach a great crowd of people.

There is a puzzling new development here in the ministry and teaching of Jesus which we ought to notice. It was a most remarkable day in our Lord's life. The record of this day begins back in Chapter 12 where Matthew tells us of Jesus' teaching in the synagogue. He began by quoting a most unusual passage from Isaiah, a prophecy that the message of God would go out to the Gentiles. Our Lord seldom spoke about the Gentiles early in his ministry. He came to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" {Matt 10:6} he said. But now he quotes this passage from Isaiah:

"Behold, my servant whom I have chosen,
my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will any one hear his voice in the streets;

he will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick,
till he brings justice to victory;
and in his name will the Gentiles hope." {Matt 12:18-21 RSV}

And on that strange note he went on to say some very solemn words to Israel. We'll just skip through them quickly:

- He warned them about the possibility of committing the unpardonable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

hear what you hear, and did not hear it." {Matt 13:10-17 RSV}

That is undoubtedly one of the most important and revealing paragraphs in all of the Bible. In it is might well call "the key to history," the great principle upon which God acts to determine human events is what Jesus is setting before us in this series of parables. It is all based upon this great principle which he declares in the midst of this paragraph. You can never understand what is happening in current events or the whole scope of history unless you understand this principle. It is not only the principle by which God judges nations and determines the course of international events, but it is the principle by which God determines what happens to individuals as well.

So this morning we want to look only at this interlude Jesus has with his disciples in answer to their question. I want to examine with you four things in this section:

- We want to look more closely at the question the disciples asked and at our Lord's answer.
- Then at this central principle on which all of history turns,
- Then at the illustration of it in the nation Israel, and,
- Finally, at the unique privilege enjoyed by these disciples, which we now share, in hearing these things.

That is our program. So look again at the question with me:

Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." {Matt 13:10-11 RSV}

I am sure that it was curiosity which prompted these disciples to come. They had never heard our Lord speak this way before, and they could not understand it. It is clear that they did not understand the meaning of what Jesus had to explain some of them to them. And neither did they understand why he used this approach. Puzzled and curious, they came to him and said, "Why are you doing this?"

His answer must have pleased them greatly because he said to them, "Well, to you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." The word *secrets* translated literally, "mysteries." In Scripture a mystery is a truth which cannot be known by the normal exercise of human wisdom and knowledge. It is a truth about life which, if we are to know it, God must tell us because it could never be discovered by the exercise of human intelligence. That is why these secrets, mysteries, about the kingdom of heaven, and therefore about life, will never be found in science or history or any other discipline of human knowledge or investigation. They are simply not there. And they are essential to the understanding of life. They must be disclosed to us by God.

This is why man's wisdom is never enough. We can discover many things about life and, by our technology, we can invent a lot of useful implements and gadgets but we will never, never satisfy human life in its deepest terms. We must know more; and only God can tell us. That is why these mysteries are of great importance.

The gospel itself is one of these mysteries. Its great secret, Paul says, is "Christ in you, the hope of glory." {Col 1:27}. And Paul announced in several of his letters that it was given to the apostles to unfold the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. But the unfolding began with Jesus.

These disciples must have been pleased as punch when Jesus said to them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but not to them." That made them feel like a special "in" group. They felt like the privileged few and that great feeling, is it not? We all like that wonderful feeling when somebody gathers us in close and says, "Here, I want to tell you something. Don't tell anyone else. It is for you to know, and not for them." It is a delicious morsel to chew on that is! We are instantly all ears.

The reason for this is that we suspect it only underscores what we have long believed about ourselves. We are superior people with a special ability which others do not have, and that, therefore, we have access to things which are hidden from others. And you can imagine the pride of these disciples inflated by this.

the Lord says, "To you it has been given, but not to them." But our Lord pricks that balloon of pride. He goes on to tell them the basis upon which they were chosen and not someone else. It is simple.

"For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away." {Matt 13:12 RSV}

That is a basic, fundamental law of life. That is the great principle upon which God operates to govern lives and human history. "To him who has will more be given ... but from him who has not, even what he has [or, as Luke says, 'even what he thinks he has'] will be taken away." Now, what does that mean? It is so fundamental that it applies to everything in life, to every realm of existence. It is true on the physical level. You have muscles in your body. Suppose you deliberately refuse to use one? You will find that soon it will weaken and atrophy, and that what you have is taken away. All you need do to render your arm powerless is simply to tie it up and not use it for a few months. Soon you will find you have lost the ability to build this way.

Reduced to its simplest statement, the principle means this:

Truth must be acted upon in order to be retained.

Truth rejected or unused is lost. God is constantly confronting men with truth about everything, and the result is the course of life. Man is so constructed that he is made to act upon truth. But if he doesn't he loses the truth that has already been given to him. That is a very vital and important principle in understanding human life. It is the basis upon which God determines advance or regression either in individuals or in nations.

This is a fantastically important statement that Jesus makes here! It explains, for example, why the disciples were called. When the Lord saw them -- simple fishermen, tax collectors, etc. -- he saw in the hearts of them a willingness to act on truth. When they saw the truth, and knew it to be truth, they acted on it. That is the way they responded when he called them. The moment he said to them, "Come, follow me," they rose, and followed him. They acted on truth. He had perceived that in them. That is why to them the secrets of the Kingdom were revealed, while to others it was hidden. Their willingness to act on the truth they knew was the reason they were given more truth.

Yesterday up in the mountains we had a meeting of some of the Christian Education leaders of the church. We had a little body life sharing time among ourselves up there. David Roper told us about an encounter he had with one of the Christians on the Stanford campus. A young man who is associated with the athletic department there has recently become a Christian and has been reading the Scriptures and growing in his faith. The other day this young man had on a sweater which David admired. Just in passing David complimented him on it. The young man didn't say anything then and they went on talking about other things. All of a sudden, to David's astonishment, this young man pulled his sweater off over his head and handed it to David, saying, "Here, you take it." Dave protested, "No, why should I do that? I didn't intend anything like that. I admired it. It's yours." But the man insisted. Dave said, "Why are you doing this?" And he said, "Ever since I've been reading the Bible and I learned there that Christians are to be generous with their possessions, I've wanted to start practicing that, and I want you to have this sweater."

Since I heard about that I've been admiring quite a few things and I must say that the degree of openness to this truth has been discouragingly slight!

But that is a beautiful illustration of just exactly what Jesus meant -- a willingness to act on truth, not that it applies to someone else, not procrastinate, but to begin immediately to act upon it, to risk what is necessary, in order to step out on truth that is learned. That, he says, is the secret of advance and growth in Christian life.

I can see this being demonstrated in a thousand different ways in this congregation. One of the very encouraging aspects of life today is the tremendous spiritual growth we are seeing in young people coming to the church -- as a result of the spiritual growth that is taking place in their lives.

maturity with such leaps and bounds that they are putting to shame many who have been Christians. They are ready to act on what they know. That explains their rapid progress in the gospel.

The truths to which they are responding have been there in the Scriptures for centuries. They have been in churches in every section of the land; but, for some reason, very few seem to want to take them and obey them. To the degree this congregation is experiencing the blessing of God, it is because we have been simple enough to believe and obey what God has said. Try it, and you will see immediately that to those who have more will be given, and they shall have in abundance.

But the contrary is also true. If you don't obey truth, it is taken away from you. This great principle is illustrated in international affairs:

- Why, for instance, has Great Britain lost its empire and been reduced to a second rate power today after being the leading nation of the world for many decades? The answer is that the British people knew truth which they failed to act on. They did not incorporate into their economic and national life the truth which they admitted widely as a people. They were false to principles they claimed to be true, and, as a result, their scepter of power has been removed and they have sunk into obscurity. There is no other explanation for it. You can talk about economics, about politics, about such things, but those are merely the processes by which this principle is worked out.
- Why did the Roman Empire fall before the barbarian hordes after it had been queen of the world for centuries? The answer is that, when its paganism was confronted with the truth of the Christian gospel, it rejected that truth and fought back with fire and sword and wild beasts and cruel torture. The empire crumbled from within. All the wisdom of the Senate and all the experience garnered over centuries of world dominion was unable to hold that empire together.
- Why are the Russian people now deprived of the right to worship, and of freedom of speech, of the press, and forbidden to travel abroad or even to read of other cultures? Because, when the gospel was widespread in Russia, as once it was, it was canonized and ritualized and emptied of its content until it became a hollow shell of pretense and religious hypocrisy. When that happened, the nation was rendered ripe for revolution.
- What do you think is happening in the United States today? This nation is facing exactly that possibility. The open rejection of the truth about Jesus Christ on the part of the American people, which they have known and seen, and the hollow pretense of obeying it when they really do not believe it, is dimming the light in this land and removing the barriers to savagery and violence. The barbarians are at the doors again. And evangelicals can be as guilty as anyone else in this regard.

This is the great principle upon which God determines history. It is illustrated in Israel, as Jesus goes on to show. He says,

"This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." {Matt 13:13 RSV}

And then he quotes Isaiah, saying that 725 years previously Isaiah had predicted that this would happen, that when this people heard and saw the truth they would not understand it nor receive it:

"With them indeed is fulfilled the prophesy of Isaiah which says:
'You shall indeed hear but never understand,
and you shall indeed see but never perceive.'" {Matt 13:14 RSV}

What does Jesus mean? Well, the fact that he spoke in parables was the beginning of the process of taking away the truth from a people who would not receive it. They had it, but they did not act on it. Jesus

truth is being removed, taken away. Jesus says, "This is why I am speaking to them in parables -- they will not see. They have the truth set before them and they will not act. They will not understand." Then he quotes Isaiah further:

"For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are heavy of hearing,
and their eyes they have closed," {Matt 13:15a RSV}

Do you notice who did this? Do not read it as though God dulled this people's heart and stopped them from seeing. They did it. Their eyes they have closed, their heart they have made to grow dull, and their ears they have stopped up. Why? Well, as Isaiah said,

"lest they should perceive with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their heart,
and turn for me to heal them." {Matt 13:15b RSV}

In other words, they understood what he was after and they sensed deep inside that he could do what he would do. He could heal this nation, heal its hurt, its sickness and weakness, its darkness and blindness. The amazing thing is that these people did not want what God wanted to give them. They didn't want to be healed. They sensed that, in the coming of Jesus, God was reaching out to them to restore them, to bring them back to the whole. And in the terrible perversity of their hearts they didn't want it. They preferred their own weakness, and folly, because to be healed meant to confess and to acknowledge that they were wrong and their pride had to be humbled and they weren't ready to pay that price.

This is the terrible judgment that our Lord brings down upon history. He said, "light has come into the world and men love darkness rather than light," {John 3:19 RSV}. That is the condemnation.

"And because of that," he says, "I am going to speak to them in parables. I will still tell them the truth, but I am truth. I cannot speak anything else but truth. But they will not hear it nor understand it. Only those who are prepared to act upon what they hear will understand it." -- That is the great lesson which forms the background of these parables.

But then, in contrast, Jesus said to his disciples, "How happy you are, how privileged you are."

"Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear." {Matt 13:16 RSV}

That is, "You are ready to act, and thank God for that. And what a blessing this will bring to you, for you can get more truth!" They were twice blessed, he said, because:

"Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." {Matt 13:17 RSV}

He is thinking back across the whole range of the Old Testament, thinking of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and Elijah, and Elisha and Samuel, and David and Moses, and all the others. He is saying, "The Spirit speaking through them, showed them that there would be a revelation of truth the like of which had never been seen before. It would be in the coming of a person who would speak and perform the ultimate unfolding of truth. Nothing that the mind of man in its present capacity could ever grasp would be omitted in this unfolding." And, he says, "You are those people. How happy you are! How carefully you ought to listen to this because this is the final, ultimate revelation of truth the way God sees it, the hidden answer to the problems and confusion of life. You are so fortunate because you are seeing what men have longed for for centuries."

We stand with those disciples today.

These words are addressed to us because we can see what they saw. We can hear what they heard. For us, they are truly blessed. We have set before us the unfolding of the secrets of life.

If we don't hear it, if we don't grasp it, if we don't heed it, we have only ourselves to blame. God offers us not only the life that comes from Jesus Christ, but also the promise that he will unfold to us a deeper understanding we need to meet any difficult problem or circumstance of life and to see it as God would see it, but give ourselves to the study and understanding of his Word. As Paul says, "In Christ are hidden all kinds of treasures of wisdom and knowledge," {cf, Col 2:2-3}.

As you look around at life today it is very obvious that something is terribly lacking in the understanding of men. We have vast technological ability and can construct all kinds of useful machines, and we can

THE CASE OF THE LAVISH FARMER

by Ray C. Stedman

We shall turn again this morning to the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Here we are together at Sermon on the Sea which our Lord preached from a boat on the Sea of Galilee. A great crowd was assembled on the beach listening to him as he delivered seven parables which he called the seven mysteries, of the kingdom of heaven. These seven parables constitute a view of the age following our appearance on earth, the present age in which we live.

The parables, Jesus said, are hidden to those who do not pay attention, who do not listen, but open to those who do. His constant warning all the way through is, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." So I have invited you to give close attention to these parables which unveil the great span of time between our first coming and his second. They are a look behind the scenes of history through the eyes of Jesus Christ which he points out to us the principles and powerful forces that are at work to produce the events recorded in history books and on the pages of our daily newspapers. If you want to understand the world in which you live it is essential that you know what these parables mean.

Each parable is like a mystery novel with certain clues given to guide us to the meaning. We are going to study the first one this morning. Like any good teacher, our Lord began by interpreting the first two parables so that we will understand them. By helping the disciples with the first two, Jesus gave them the process of interpretation, the process to follow in discovering what the other parables mean. Then he left them to their own, as he does us, with a little additional help on the last parable. Therefore each of these parables is given to us to think through what our Lord means by it, and each contains a great revelation which it is essential for us to understand. So as we go through them I hope you will feel like Perry Mason, with a desire to piece together the clues that God has given, and to understand what he is saying in these unusual stories about the kingdom of heaven.

The first story is about a farmer who broadcasts his seed with a lavish hand, throwing it out with a liberal hand where it falls. Matthew records it for us beginning with Verse 3:

And he told them many things in parables, saying, "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up,

waited and waited, and the pause became so embarrassing that the disciples finally came and said, "Why do you speak to them in parables?"

Our Lord's explanation, which we have already examined in our message last week, is that God is on a great, fundamental principle in human history: "To him who has will more be given" {Matt 13:12} "but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away," {Matt 13:12c RSV}. That seems unfair, doesn't it? But we must understand that when the Lord says, "To him who has," he is speaking of the possession of truth -- truth which is acted on. You do not have truth when you merely have it in your head. You have truth only when you have acted on it, when it has affected you and changed you. It does not do you any good just to learn something, and store it away as a fact you know about life. If you do not act upon it, you do not have it; you do not have it. So what Jesus is really saying is, "He who acts on truth will be given more truth; he who has it and doesn't act on it will lose it. And what is more, he will lose the very capacity to receive it." This is his warning. And he said to the disciples, "To you it has been given to know" {Matt 13:11b} because they were the kind of people who acted on truth. So he starts to explain this parable to them with verse 18:

"Hear then the parable of the sower. When any one hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in his heart;

being dropped into human hearts everywhere. The sowing started with Jesus. He was the first who went out with this word. Millions have followed him since, sowing this seed wherever they go in the form of a simple Christian testimony. It may be in an elaborate sermon, or in a book that so. It may be just a word, a single phrase dropped into a conversation, that is like a seed dropped into a heart. It takes root and changes that whole life.

Some of you can testify that the thing which arrested you and turned you around and changed your life was a phrase which somebody uttered. This seed is powerful.

The crux of the parable is the condition of the soils into which this seed is dropped. This is what our Lord wants us to comprehend. There are various kinds of soils, he says, upon which the word can fall. The first, of course, is the human heart. Wherever the word is sown, four kinds of soil are usually present, four kinds of soil of the human heart to which this word speaks. They are all here this morning. In this congregation you are representatives of each of these four kinds of soil. Our Lord wants us to see what they are.

What is the trouble with this first heart? Jesus says, "When any one hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes (the birds are a symbol of the evil one) and snatches away what was sown in his heart; this is what was sown along the path."

This first kind of individual has a heart which is hard and narrow like a path beaten across a field. It is trodden down and hardened and narrowed by the traffic of human feet as they cross the field. The trouble with this heart is that it has grown hard and narrow.

Jesus focuses upon that which causes it. The word comes, he says, but they do not understand it. It is not that they could not understand, but that they do not try. They don't take the time to understand.

Now, what kind of a heart is this? You can see that this is what we might call the materialistic heart, the heart that does not want to be bothered with thinking about anything beyond what you can see and hear and touch and taste. This is the humanistic heart, the liberal heart, or the atheistic heart.

Here is a man who has been rendered momentarily thoughtful by the word of the kingdom. Someone has challenged him for the moment to think about God, and about life. And for a moment he wonders, "There is something to this." He has received a passing impression -- but it requires more thought, more self-evaluation -- and he does not want to be bothered. So he shrugs it off. And, immediately, our Lord says, "The enemy comes, i.e. Satan, the evil one, and snatches away the thought out of his heart, and it does not come back again. So he goes on untroubled, thinking that the world remains the way he has conceived it."

There are many people like this, who live on these terms. C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters*, describes a man who goes into the British Museum and sits down to read certain books that are interesting. Something he reads suggests to him a thought about God and he is inspired to think of him. For a moment he looks as though he is really going on to think this idea through. But then Screwtape manages to distract him with the thought that it is time for lunch and that he would be in much better shape to tackle this subject after he has eaten. Screwtape goes on to say,

Once he was in the street the battle was won. I showed him a newsboy shouting the midday paper, and a 73 bus going past, and before he reached the bottom of the steps I had got into him an unalterable conviction that, whatever odd ideas might come into a man's head when he was shut up alone with his books, a healthy dose of 'real life' (by which he meant the bus and the newsboy) was enough to show him that all 'that sort of thing' just couldn't be true.

That is the kind of soil Jesus is talking about. The devil takes care of him, brainwashes him. The thought is snatched away if it is not dealt with then -- and it never returns again.

There are many like that, They have settled for a world bounded on the north by their work, on the south by their family, on the east by taxes, and on the west by death. That is the whole of life to them. The world is described in the little jingle that goes,

Into this world to eat and to sleep,
And to know no reason why he was born
Save to consume the corn,
Devour the cattle, flock, and fish,
And leave behind an empty dish.

And that's it. That's all. That's life. When the word of the kingdom falls upon that kind of heart it is a momentary impression. But it is immediately shrugged off because it is different, it is challenging, it is the possibility of an entire world he has never thought of. So he divests himself of it and the energy takes it away and it is gone.

And yet do you know that, remarkably enough, this very verse was used to reach John Bunyan and lead him to Christ? That blasphemous old tinker of Bedford was known as the most godless man in his village, regarded as so hardhearted and committed to godlessness that no Christian had any hope for him. When he heard this story of the sower and these very words seized upon his heart. And he said to himself, "The devil knows that if a man believes the word he'll be saved!" So he believed it, and he was saved. He is the author of Pilgrim's Progress and a tremendous testimony for God in this age.

Let's look now at the second soil. Our Lord goes on to describe it:

"As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away."
{Matt 13:20-21 RSV}

What is the matter with this heart? It is rocky. But don't think of it as soil containing a lot of rocks. It doesn't mean that. The idea here is that there are a few inches of earth on top of a broad shelf of bedrock. In other words this is shallow, thin soil underlain by a ledge of bedrock. The key our Lord gives us here is "no root in himself." This is what we would call a shallow life, one that is flitting from this to that, from one experience to another, never content with anything for very long. This heart is always on the prowl, always searching, groping. You have met people like that -- faddists, enthusiasts for the gospel this week ("What a wonderful thing this is!") and next week it is Geritol, or vitamin Z, or whatever. The word our Lord uses to describe this kind of person is, literally, "seasonal." When the season is on to believe the gospel they believe it.

Many people like that are being reached right now. For example, among the tens of thousands of people who are turning to Christ in our day there are a lot who are doing so like this. But when the season changes they will drop right back. They will not continue; they are seasonal. They live on the surface, they are shallow, they are emotional. There is no depth in their life, nothing goes deep into their heart. When the gospel reaches them they receive it with joy. They think it is great! They are enthusiastic. But when the season changes and tribulation and persecution come, when it is no longer a warm, glorious day for the word but it becomes cold and frosty, immediately they are gone. They wither and die.

Thus our Lord illustrates the terrible danger of a shallow heart, a heart that does not want to evaluate the word deeper but is always living on the surface, always relating to the event of the moment and concerned only with the moment. The devil took care of the first kind of man, but the flesh takes care of this one. The emotional life will make it very difficult for him to receive the word of God which changes his heart.

Then there is the third type of heart:

"As for what was sown among thorns, this is he who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful." {Matt 13:22 RSV}

Here is the typical American businessman -- and his wife. What is the trouble? Busy-ness, that's the trouble. Not that he is uninterested; he is interested in the gospel. It is not that he is shallow; he isn't. He is v

thinking in depth, of analysis of issues and long meditation. He does it in business; she does it in life. The trouble is that he wants it all. He wants the fruitfulness of life that comes from the gospel; he also wants everything else. He wants the so-called "finer things" of life. We describe him as trying to keep up with the Joneses. (That means buying things you don't need with money you don't have to im

We are returning this morning to Matthew 13 where we are looking at of parables our Lord gave the age in which we live, the age introduced by his first coming and which has been unfolding now twenty centuries. He looked down those twenty centuries and gave us in parable form some clues understanding of our own age. It is very important that we see what these are. We come today to this series of parables. We looked last week at the parable of the sower. Now we come to what is the parable of the wheat and the tares, or as we have it in our Revised Standard Version, the wheat and the tares. This is part of the series which our Lord gave all on one day as he sat in a boat on the Sea of Galilee and instructed the crowds gathered on the shore.

One of the issues concerning our world and the course of this age which has been debated for centuries is the question: Is the world getting better or is it getting worse? And from time to time, depending on the circumstances, asked that question, you could find a majority of voices raised on one side or the other. At the beginning of this century you would have been laughed almost to scorn if you had suggested that the world is getting worse instead of better. Today it is the other way around. Now it is almost ridiculous to suggest that the world is getting better. Yet there are still some who hold this view. The other day I ran across a rather humorous statement of it:

My granddad, viewing earth's worn cogs,
Said, "Things were going to the dogs."
His granddad, in his house of logs,
Said, "Things were going to the dogs."
And his grandad, in the Flemish bogs,
Said, "Things were going to the dogs."
And his grandad, in his old skin togs,
Said, "Things were going to the dogs."
There's one thing I have to state:
The dogs have had a good long wait.

That is the philosophy which suggests that the world, if not improving, at least is not getting any worse. But there are others who take a very different view today. We are going to seek the answer to that question in the parable of the wheat and the tares because our Lord gives us a key to the understanding of that

"Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "He who sows the good seed is the Son of man, Jesus himself; the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil;" {Matt 13:36-39a RSV}

So the seed sown here is not ideas, not the word of Scripture, not the word of the gospel, but people. However, this does link up with the first parable. The ones which were produced by the good seed in the first parable are now in turn taken by the Lord and scattered throughout the world. The picture we have here. But this is a quite different sowing. The first one goes on continuously; this one, once, at the beginning of the age. Yet there is a sense in which it is going on all through this age. We were looking at the soils; here we are looking at the whole field which Jesus says is the world.

It is important to notice how the Lord begins this parable. Do not, as many do in reading this series of parables, make the mistake of taking the very first thing he mentions as being the entire comparison. No, it is the whole picture that he has in view. The kingdom of heaven is compared to a man who sowed seed in his field, and another man came and sowed some other kind of seed, and it all grew up to the servants came and asked the man what to do, etc. The whole story is a picture of the kingdom of God's work and God's operations in the world of our day -- that is the kingdom of heaven. Literally.

finally, when it comes to harvest, even a child can tell that it is not wheat. The Jews called it "degenerate wheat" or, literally, "bastard wheat" because it appears to be wheat but it is not. That is the figure Jesus employs. Now these too are persons that are sown. They are what Jesus calls "the sons of the evil one." They too have been scattered throughout the human race by the enemy -- and especially among the wheat. See more about that in a moment.

I know that there is a sense in which the whole world, as the Scriptures tell us, is under the control of the devil. This is the philosophy and thought. Jesus referred to the devil as the ruler of this world because he governs the hearts of people. But, in the light of this parable, I think it is wrong to think of everybody in the world, men, women, and children alike, as "sons of the evil one." Jesus never called anybody a son of the devil. He called the Pharisees who were teachers of evil in the name of righteousness. That was what he called a son of the devil. Someone who pretended to be religiously correct but was actually disseminating wrong, evil, error.

It is true that we are all members of a fallen race. We are all born into this world tainted with Adam's sin. That is why that we all tend toward evil naturally. No one has to teach you how to lie. Did you ever go to school to learn that? Do you have a diploma to show that you have successfully accomplished that? No, you learn all this naturally. You never have to be trained in how to be dishonest, how to cheat, how to be a hypocrite. We are all natural hypocrites, and experts at it, because we are members of a fallen race. Babies could hardly be called "sons of the evil one" in the sense our Lord intends here.

I remember that Dr. H. A. Ironside once described a rather stern and austere pastor who went to visit a woman. She was showing him her baby, holding the infant up so he could see how beautiful it was. The pastor drew a long face and said to her, "Madam, what a pity that this little one should be a child of the devil." Well, that is hardly the way to make a hit with the mother -- nor is it theologically correct. Although that the child is in a world dominated by satanic thought, and that, as he grows, he will probably become more and more possessed with wrong ideas and wrong concepts, which he will be totally unaware are wrong, that thus he may gradually become committed to these evil principles, it is only at that point that we call him a "son of the evil one" in this sense.

What Jesus has in mind here are largely the teachers of evil under the guise of religion. Those are "the sons of the evil one." In other words, he thinks of the whole human race as a field, and at the beginning, he scattered in it men committed to him, men and women in whom the truth of the word had taken root and had come alive. He thrust them out into the field, scattered them here and there, in order that they might reproduce themselves and yield men committed to him. Then Satan came and did the same. He deliberately scattered in this field of rather lifeless humanity certain evil teachers who appear to be good and righteous. Jesus began by scattering men committed to the word of truth in order to produce more like himself. Satan began by scattering men committed to the lie in order to produce more like himself. Now the wheat and the weeds grow together now until the harvest. See how they grow. Jesus said,

So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the seeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?" He said to them, "An enemy has done this." {Matt 13:26-28a RSV}

That is the sowing our Lord is talking about here. This fits the historical picture exactly. In the early part of this age, it was very difficult to tell true Christians from false. If you read the writings of the early fathers from the first two or three centuries, you find them hard to classify. Many of them were truly godly, genuinely born-again, regenerate men who loved God. And yet they sometimes taught error and heresies right along with the truth, and they are just as strong for the error as they are for the truth. It is disconcerting to read these men. You would think that we ought to find a pure fountain of truth in the early centuries, but we do not.

Gradually the great central truths of the faith began to be debated and there was a great deal of controversy. They had to hammer it all out and compare it with the Scriptures. But as the truth gradually became apparent that the heresies were leading men astray while the truth was still established. Gradually the tares began to take form and appear to be what they really are. It was then that the church were crystallized into the creeds as we recite today -- the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, and the statements of the truth devised in order to counteract the heresy that was rampant within the church.

Then, during the so-called Dark Ages, you find the next step described by our Lord:

The servants said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he said, "No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with it. Let both grow together until the harvest;" {Matt 13:28b-30a RSV}

"Let both grow together until the harvest." That is our Lord's word. It is amazing how many Christians, those words of Jesus, and are constantly trying to purify the church in ways unwarranted by the Lord. Even in the great awakening we are seeing today, many young people are making this mistake again. They think that they are going to go off and start their own church, and it is going to be a true church, a pure church. There is going to be no heresy in it. And so you find groups splintering off and breaking away and calling themselves the "True Church," the "One Way," the "Only Way," etc. They say they have the truth and no one else does. They are going to be free from error and from any kind of garbled doctrine. But, you see, it is impossible. Jesus said that you cannot do it that way. You cannot separate evil from the church. You cannot even drive it out. It is going to be there in some form. This does not mean that we are not to expose it, but to meet it positively with the teaching of the truth. We are not to allow those who exhibit doctrinal error to take leadership within the church. Other Scripture helps us here. But what our Lord wants us to understand is that no human effort is going to eliminate error from the church. "Let them both grow together until the harvest," he said.

Now, you can deal with it in your own heart. This is how completely intermingled error is with truth. You will find it in your own heart. No one person is completely true and pure and perfect.

I even have a little error in myself. I don't see it -- but my wife does. And it breaks upon my own heart as I gaze from time to time. It is there.

So how are you going to get rid of it in the church? Well, Jesus says you cannot get rid of it. You cannot get rid of it if it is there, and it is going to stay there, and no human effort is going to eliminate it. Therefore all attempts to try to form a pure church, or a pure council of churches, etc., are doomed to failure before they begin. Jesus has pointed out.

As I said, this too has happened in history. In the 4th and 5th century there were godly men who advocated the overthrow of heretics with the sword and with fire. And yet notice in the parable how the Lord restrains his true servants. He told them not to do anything like this. But throughout the Middle Ages, both truth and error in this form were growing together, evil in the name of religion became more and more apparent. Finally, its true nature began to be very evident to people when thousands were perishing in the hands of evil in the name of religion. That is what finally caused the Protestant Reformation.

But even honest servants of God at that time wondered if they should do the same. Luther once wrote to the Catholic emissaries, Emser, "If heretics have deserved the stake, then you and the Pope should be burned a thousand times. Nevertheless, I do not want it to be done." You can see how the Spirit of Christ

restrained him from going over into this error. Unfortunately such was not always the case. John ultimately consented to the burning of an heretic named Servetus, so Protestants have burnt their

What is the Lord's plan for handling this problem? He says, "Let them both grow together until the harvest." That is, "Don't worry about it, I'll take care of it. I've got my own plan for handling this and nothing I do is going to eliminate the problem [as has proven true in history]. But don't worry about it. Keep the message positive, preach the word, teach the truth, deal with it in your own hearts, exclude it from your fellowship, yes, but don't try to eliminate error. Don't launch a crusade that exists only for the purpose of trying to root out evil or error, particularly religious error, because you won't succeed."

This is the mistake of many of the separatists movements of our day. Billy Graham is often under attack from them because he recognizes that there is error in the churches and that he does not have the ability to distinguish whether a man is genuinely a Christian or not. So until he can see this clearly by his fruit, he accepts him at face value. There are some who attack him viciously because of this, pretending that they have the ability to make this distinction, while the Lord said that no one could.

There are sons of the evil one in every church. There are some right here among us this morning who are not true Christians, who talk like Christians, who act like Christians outwardly, but who have never yielded their hearts and lives to the Lord Jesus Christ. They are representatives of the doctrines of demons, seducing spirits. The Apostle Paul calls them, wrong ideas that have infiltrated society. And notice that a major point of their teaching is to give us a clue to the way that the enemy works most successfully. It is by imitation, by counterfeiting. It is so simple it would be if evil people would only look evil. Wouldn't that help a lot? If hypocrites would only look evil and growl a little bit it would help so much. But they always look so pleasant. They always talk so sweetly. They are such nice people, and that is why we go along with their ideas. We cannot believe that so many people could be so far wrong. And, unless we use the Word of God to evaluate their teachings, we are easily deceived by the niceness of people who are imitation, counterfeit apostles, as the Word of God calls them.

I picked up a magazine not long ago called Children's Friend.

the harvest field, reaping the harvest of earth. In fact the book of Revelation employs that very image: "the time is come for you to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe," {cf, Rev 14:15}.

When Jesus sends forth his angels, it will not be something visible. Angelic activity goes on behind the scenes. So this will not be some sudden appearance of angels in the presence of men. He is describing activities that will take place in human affairs for which men will not be able to account, for which we have no explanation.

The Lord said that the reapers would go forth and bind the weeds into bundles, literally "with a fire burning." That is, the burning is not to take place immediately when the binding does. It is to come at the close of the age. What our Lord is saying will happen is that, as we near the close of the age, men of evil gathering themselves together into great associations of evil. That is the work of angels: binding the tares together into bundles unto the time of burning, the time of judgment that is to come. There are many, looking at our age, who say that this is where we are today, that we are seeing the clumping together of those of like mind, who hold to evil principles and tendencies (especially those who do so in the name of religion), that as we near the time of the end of the age there seems to be a general trend toward the association of evil persons ultimately to be swept away in judgment.

But the wheat is to be gathered into the Father's barn. Now, there is no time schedule in this parable; we cannot tell when this is to happen in relation to other events. It is simply mentioned, and left there to show the destiny of the wheat. And Jesus says, "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father." You remember that in the book of Revelation John sees a great multitude from every tribe and nation standing before God and appearing to shine as the sun in the kingdom of the Father. They have come through the great tribulation, the harvest of the earth, as men and women perhaps have laid down their lives in death -- but not necessarily violent death. Jesus' word to all Christians is: "Be faithful unto death" {Rev 2:10}. That doesn't mean you must have your life taken violently, but you are to remain true unto death. This is the sign that you really belong to him.

Then at last, as John goes on to say, the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. Then shall come the time to which all the prophets have looked forward when all the earth shall blossom like the rose and men shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; there shall be no more war across the face of the earth. But that awaits the solution of God. Men must wait for that out.

Now let's return in closing to answer the question with which we began: Is the world getting better or is it getting worse?

Well the answer our Lord gives is clearly, "Both!" Good men are getting better, and more powerful, and more extensive; and evil men are getting worse, and more powerful, and more destructive. The two sowings are growing up to a harvest, side by side. If evil is getting worse, God is matching it with a demonstration of His power and with the increase of good. That is why I think it is logical to expect that, as we near the end of the age, and increasingly see evil amassing itself and breaking out in tremendous authority and power.

destructive philosophies that are so widespread in the world today. They are part of the lie of Satan. Satan can live by himself, that he is self-sufficient, that he is able to carry on his own affairs, that he can live, and, therefore, does not need God. That is the great lie which always marks the philosophy of Satan.

Or are you one of the sons of the kingdom whom God is using in this day to bring this great harvest and to produce that which will glorify and delight his heart throughout all time?

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we thank you for the truth that we have examined this morning. How it searches us out! How it sets our age into perspective and makes us see life as it really is. Teach us, Lord, to value the truth as it is in Jesus, the truth revealed to us by that One who loved us enough to give himself for us. We can trust the One who died for our sakes and whose lives live within us. We thank you for that. We pray that we may be sons of the kingdom today, teachers of truth, openers of eyes, helping men out of their darkness. For the glory of the gospel is that even those who are becoming sons of the evil one can be changed into sons of the kingdom. And you have come to make this dividing mark in history. Help us, Lord, to see ourselves as we are in relation to it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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THE CASE OF THE AMBITIOUS SEED

by Ray C. Stedman

Today we come to the third of the remarkable parables which our Lord called the secrets, the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. These were all given in one message delivered on a single occasion as he sat in the boat on the Sea of Galilee teaching the people gathered on the shore. One by one he unfolded these amazing secrets of the age between his comings, the present age in which we live. They give us insight into what is going on in our own time, and of what has been going on in history since our Lord was crucified before he comes again. I have called this third parable "The Case of the Ambitious Seed." In it we have the story of a sowing and of its results in human history. It is found in Verses 31 and 32 of Chapter 13 of the Gospel of Matthew.

Another parable he put before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." {Matt 13:31-32 RSV}

I want to stress again that these seven parables are all part of one message. Our Lord interpreted them for us as a guide to our own interpretation of the rest. He gave us a start and he expects us to go in the same direction. It is clear from the first two that every element in the story has significance. Each element is a part of some factor or movement in history. As he unfolded the meanings to us we saw what the seed represented, what the sowing was, what the soils were, what the wheat and tares stood for, and who the reapers were. These became clear as he interpreted them. This is the first parable of the series which does not have its interpretation from our Lord's lips. So he expects us, obviously, to go on applying the same principles in the first two, and to understand the others from the symbols he employed there, as well as from the interpretation he gave them.

symbols in Scripture.

This is one of the basic laws in reading the Bible. Scripture never uses a symbol in two conflicting ways, it uses them consistently throughout. This is very important for you to know. Learn how Scripture uses a symbol and then employ it the same way wherever it appears. Then you will come out with a clear understanding of what the Scripture is teaching. We must do that here.

Men have wasted their lives trying to accomplish what they call "bringing in the kingdom" by a false interpretation of this very parable and of the one that follows it, the parable of the leaven. They have influenced the whole movement of history because, by a mistaken use of the symbols that he employs, they have misunderstood what our Lord is saying.

So it is important that we view each parable here in its context and allow the Lord's interpretation to guide us.

In this parable you will notice that five symbols are used. There is the sower again, and the field in which he sowed, and the seed that is sown which in this case is mustard seed, and there is the tree which grows and the birds that make their nests in its branches. As with the other parables Jesus intends that we understand what these symbols mean in terms of what has been happening in the world since that day. So view the parable with that in mind.

It is easy to interpret the first two symbols. The sower obviously is our Lord himself. In each of the parables he has been sowing, and in the second parable he told us, "The sower is the Son of man." He sowed in the field, i.e., planted something in the world, because, again as we learned in the second parable, the seed is for the world, society, the whole of mankind.

What Jesus planted was a seed, in this case a mustard seed. This is the third sowing which occurs in the three parables, and each one is of a different seed. The use of these various seeds is our Lord's way of illustrating various aspects of the great message which he turned loose in the world. He sowed a fantastic, radical word in human society. In one case it is like wheat which, if received in good soil, will grow to a true harvest. In another case it is actually people, "the sons of the kingdom." It is an incarnation, it becomes flesh, and these people are placed here and there throughout the world, wherever the Lord is working. We saw that in our last study together. But in this case it is like a mustard seed.

Why mustard seed?

Our Lord employed here a symbol which he expected these people to understand. And if we can put ourselves back in their place, we will not have any trouble either. Mustard is a peculiar kind of seed. It has a pungent quality and this is what our Lord wanted them to catch. What do you think was the first thing that came to their thought of when they heard this symbol employed? I think it was very much like what we would expect. Mustard has the quality of pungency. It is biting, irritating, disturbing, and this is what our Lord meant.

When I was a boy growing up in Montana we lived in a little town forty-two miles from the nearest town. We didn't have any electricity or any plumbing; we were quite happy without all the modern conveniences. When we got sick we couldn't call for a doctor. There wasn't even a drugstore in town. We had to use what we called "home remedies." We had a book that contained all the remedies for any illness we could contract. If you got a cough or pneumonia or chest congestion there was a standard remedy to a cure. It was what we called a "mustard plaster." It is a gooey mixture of mustard and water smeared on a cloth and placed right on the chest. After it has been there about five minutes you can feel it begin to burn and itch and squirm. The contest is to see which will wear out first, the mustard plaster or you. You are supposed to hold it on there until you get just as red as a berry. I don't think it ever cured anything. I think you forget what was wrong!

That quality of mustard was well known from the very earliest times. It was known to be an irritant, fiery and biting, stirring up the blood. When Darius, the king of the Persians, invaded Europe with his army he was met by Alexander the Great. Darius sent Alexander a bag of sesame seed as a kind of tribute, indicating by the number of these small seeds the vast multitude of soldiers he had at his command.

Alexander received it he sent back by the same messenger a bag of mustard seed by way of saying "We can handle you, but we're tough and biting and pungent. We can handle you." And they did.

That is the character of mustard and these people knew that. So our Lord is using a very apt symbol. When he indicates that the message of the kingdom of God is intended to be arousing, irritating, disturbing to men. Turn it loose, and it will get a whole community excited, stirred up, either negatively or positively. You see it working so beautifully today.

I have been watching with great interest a church in a city not far from here. This church had for some seventy years or more, been liberally oriented. It had never taught the Bible, never believed in the supernatural. They had never understood the great gospel message. They had been concerned with social problems, and moral standards, and that sort of thing, but had never known anything of the power of the gospel. But a year or so ago, through an unusual chain of circumstances, the pastor became a real Christian. He started preaching the gospel. It is most interesting to watch what is happening in the congregation. It is making a lot of people uncomfortable. They are beginning to squirm and itch -- you can see the mustard seed working on them. Others are being healed and rejoicing in it. The pastor is doing a very gracious, loving work, proclaiming this great message, but its quality is obvious -- it is pungent and biting and burning.

Our Lord calls particular attention to another property of mustard. It has, he says, the smallest of seeds. If you have seen a mustard seed you know that it is small but obviously it is not the smallest of all seeds. There are seeds smaller than mustard seeds. There were even in Palestine in our Lord's day. Many have been disturbed by this, as though it means that our Lord did not understand much about agriculture. But we must be careful to put ourselves back into those times. We learn that there was a common proverb which used the mustard seed as a symbol of smallness or insignificance. "Small as a mustard seed," they said. We do the same today. We say something is "as small as a flea." There are smaller things than fleas. A man might use but that is a proverb which expresses smallness. Our Lord employs the mustard seed in a very different way. Proverbially, it is the smallest of all seeds.

Here he is evidently stressing the apparent insignificance of the gospel. It does not look like much. It does not sound like much. You proclaim, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." That does not sound very impressive to many people. It is so simple that you can teach it to children and to idiots and morons. Even they can understand "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." So the world is not very excited by it, or very much impressed with it. The world does not regard it as a tremendous, earth-shaking power. You do not find chairs of philosophy in the universities dedicated to this subject, the gospel in its simplicity is insignificant, it is despised. But let someone actually believe it, and see what happens. Let them invite Christ and invite him into their life and it is the most transforming, the most revolutionary thing that has happened to them. It is the beginning of a radical change in all their life.

Just yesterday I was in my study and a young man came to see me. He is a law student in a large university and was troubled with intellectual problems about Christianity. He sat down and we discussed some of the intellectual barriers he seemed to see. As we talked I could sense that underneath he had a deep hunger. He had been impressed by the radiance and beauty of life that he had seen in a number of places. He soon realized that his trouble was not intellectual at all; it was simply that he thought this was the way to God, that he had to think it all through and answer all the questions before he could become a Christian.

As best I could I tried to help him see that God would reach him and meet him right where he was. He made a venture of faith, that if he responded to the promise of God he could put God to the test. And God would come through and fulfill his promise or he would not, one or the other, and then he would know. This young man made the venture. He received the Lord Jesus into his heart. Simply, quietly, he accepted Christ. And almost immediately he broke into tears of relief and a joy filled his heart. He was radiant. He said, "What a difference!" He called up a friend and the first thing he said was, "I'm a Christian! And the best thing is, Jesus keeps talking to me all the time, from within." Just like that his life was transformed. It was the greatest thing that ever happened to him. Nothing will be the same again, forever. But what a simple message. And yet how mighty it is!

This is the seed our Lord is talking about. This message of the kingdom is like a seed of mustard p

midst of society, with fantastic power and pungency.

But now look at the tree that grows out of it. Our Lord said, "... but when it is grown it is the great tree, and the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." No key to this parable. Did you ever see a mustard tree? In California we have fields of mustard every where you can see acres of the yellow flowers. Did you ever see any of them grow into a tree? No. Mustard is an annual that dies every year. It is impossible for it to grow into a tree.

When I was in Israel a number of years ago I was taken out by the side of the Sea of Galilee and shown a "mustard tree." It was a small tree about ten or twelve feet high with a little berry on it which the tourist agency said was filled with a black powder which he called mustard seed. The grains were very small. I still have some of this powder in my pocket. I checked up on it later and found out that it isn't a seed at all; it is just black powder and it will never grow into a tree. And that wasn't a mustard tree, either. It was another kind of tree. But the tourist agency was showing us something which matches this parable and so they have labeled it a mustard tree. One of the things to learn in touring Israel is to take everything with a heavy dose of salt.

No, mustard is not a tree; it does not grow into a tree. Then why did Jesus say it did? Right there is the key to the parable. Our Lord obviously intended to teach that this growth is unnatural growth. It is not what you would expect from mustard seed. It is something different than is to be expected. He is teaching that in this age there is to be an unnatural, unusual growth. Instead of the lowly, humble growth you would expect from a mustard seed there would be a huge, abnormal, ungainly growth into a tree.

What is the meaning of that? Well, what is the normal result that you expect when the gospel comes to the human heart? What kind of character does it produce? From the Scriptures and from experience we know that it produces lowliness of heart. It takes away pride, destroys egotism and self-centeredness and makes a person humble and lowly of mind, meek and gentle toward others, ready to serve. Jesus said, "He that would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven must become the least of all. If any would become great among you, let him become the servant of all," {Mark 9:35}. That is the normal, natural, usual result of the mustard seed growth. So what would unnatural growth be? It would be loftiness, pride, ambition, domination and concern for self. That is unnatural growth from this kind of seed. (When a tree is used symbolically in Scripture it always stands for authority and power and dominion. In the book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar is symbolized by a tree. Pharaoh, in Exodus, is symbolized by a tree. These were men of power and authority.)

What do we find has happened in the world in these last twenty centuries? Christendom, which began as a lowly, humble plant, spread among men in the simplicity recounted in the book of Acts -- like a humble, lowly plant, but with a sting and biting in its effects -- has grown into a huge, ungainly, abnormal tree, concerned with power and domination, wanting to be served instead of to serve. Isn't that true? Probably the blackest day in the history of the Christian church was that day in the 4th century when the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire and elevated the church to a position of worldly power from whence it has since claimed rule even over emperors and to dictate terms to kings -- the false greatness of external power which became like a great tree in the midst of society.

Protestants tend to say that applies to the Roman Catholic Church, but it isn't the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has its elements of both the pungency of the true mustard seed and the unnatural growth of towering pomposity and power -- but so has Protestantism. We are just as guilty. We have built imposing church buildings and even in evangelical circles have been concerned with our prestige and our image in the community and our image, and have sought the patronage and the admiration of the world. We have advertised ourselves, have found every way that we can to publicize ourselves and keep ourselves in the eyes of the world.

But God never intended the church to do that. The church, as Paul says in Ephesians 4, is to consist of lowliness and gentleness and meekness of character, not talking about itself. The early Christians were not around talking about the church. In the book of Acts you never see a word about the church as part of the proclamation of the gospel. The church doesn't save anybody; the Lord does. The church doesn't help; it is the Lord who helps. Wherever these early Christians went they never mentioned the church.

person joined the family of God. They talked about the Lord. This is what our Lord is indicating.

A number of years ago I heard a story about Dr. Oswald J. Smith, the great missionary preacher from Toronto. He was in Brazil and was being shown through one of the great Protestant cathedrals through a very impressive building with high gothic arches and beautiful stained glass windows -- very expensive. He went through in silence, never saying a word because his concern, his heartbeat has always been for the Lord. When they finished the tour he said to the guide, "How many missionaries does this church support?" The guide was nonplussed and said, "I'm sorry, sir, I don't know. I'll ask the pastor. He's standing right outside." And the pastor said, "Well, we have two missionaries." Dr. Smith looked around at this expensive building and said, "You support two missionaries? This church is a stench in the nostrils of God!" I don't know what kind of hit that made with the pastor, but it does point up the very thing our Lord is getting at here.

And, you know, you can find the same tendency right here. We are sometimes not content to be little-known, busy proclaiming the burning, pungent message of Christ. Oftentimes we crave a degree of prominence and position. Like James and John we covet a position at the right hand of the Lord. We want to be seen and known and admired of men. I have always rejoiced that here at PBC we have made it from the very beginning not to advertise the church, not even to talk about it when we go around to the people. We have discovered time and time again that when we are quite content not to say a word about ourselves we have a wide open door of opportunity and service by which to magnify the Lord Jesus Christ. To maintain a low profile in the community there is almost nothing we can't do. But the minute we become famous and some notoriety and publicity then our influence begins to ebb. This is right in line with what our Lord is saying.

Notice also that this tree was to have many great branches. We are not pressing the symbol too far as a prediction of the many divisions and denominations of Christendom. In each town or community where they went, the apostles always organized churches which were independent of one another, governed by the Lord, but were united together in the love and fellowship of the Spirit. They were bound together by mutual interests, but never organizationally. But soon human wisdom began to intervene and these separate churches were incorporated into associations. As the church gradually grew together there emerged in rather a short time the great divisions and denominational divisions of Christendom. How like a tree they are.

And yet, despite this abnormal growth we must remember that what our Lord planted was his seed. The mustard seed is still present, even though it is obscured and difficult to see behind the towering and elevated position of much of the great tree.

Finally, what is the significance of the birds which come and make their nests in the branches? We don't have to look very far for the understanding of that. Right in this very series of parables our Lord tells us what the birds mean. In the first parable he said that when the seed of the word falls upon a hardened heart the birds come and snatch it away. And in his interpretation he said that the birds represented the evil powers of the enemy, whose evil powers and forces are at work upon men's lives.

If the Lord had not said that we might not have read this in that way. There is an interpretation of this parable which says that this is a picture of the gospel going out to all the world and growing up into an immense church, and that the birds are song birds -- robins and bluebirds and others which come and make their nests and are symbols of beautiful things which happen in the church. But that would be exactly opposite to what our Lord uses them. These are not song birds; they are vultures and buzzards, birds of prey, apt symbols of evil persons and evil ideas which make their home right in God's church.

This is confirmed in the book of Revelation. The false church is symbolized there by the great harlot city called "Mystery Babylon the Great," {Rev 17:5}. When it is overthrown an angel announces that "Babylon the Great is fallen, is fallen, and has become the habitation of demons, and the hold of every evil spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird," {cf, Rev 18:2}.

You notice that it is only since the tree is fully grown and has branched out that this has taken place. Near the end of the age this has occurred. How visibly this has been demonstrated in our day when pulpits and the spokesmen of the church has come a flood of stupid, crazy, mixed-up ideas -- evil ideas which have blasted and blighted and ruined the hearts and minds of people, just as our Lord said.

comparatively short time ago that the great denominations of our day, though they represented an abnormal development, still were basically true to the faith and stood solidly on the authority of the

by Ray C. Stedman

I invite you now to turn again to the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew where we will find another of the parables that our Lord gave on a single occasion by the Sea of Galilee. In them he shows how the parable form the great secrets of the kingdom of heaven, the mysteries of the present age, the real forces and powers at work in the age which began with our Lord's first coming and which will end with his second appearing. Today we come to the fourth of these parables. It occupies but one verse in the chapter, Verse 33:

He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened." {Matt 13:33 RSV}

significant signs, from day to day almost, which indicate that we are nearing the time which our Lord called the "close of the age." If that is the correct interpretation the world almost completely leavened by the gospel, almost entirely Christian.

But what are the actual facts? Well, you know as well as I that never in all of history has there been so much hatred, more crime, more violence, more injustice, more wretchedness, more vicious evil among men as there is in our day. Of all the centuries, historians agree, the 20th is the bloodiest. There is more blood shed by Christians in the 20th century than there ever was in any other, including the 1st. The world is a more pagan today than it ever was in the days of the Apostle Paul. In fifty years, a godless, materialistic philosophy called Communism has grown from just a handful of men to spread over half the earth. A billion people are under the control of this completely atheistic system. Even in our own so-called Christian country, a poll taken not long ago rated the birth of Christ fourteenth in a list of important events. Though more Bibles are being sold than ever before, still 50% of the people of this country cannot read one of the gospels. So Christ must have failed or else something has gone desperately wrong with the world if the common interpretation of this parable is to be accepted.

But if we will listen to this story as that crowd did, and react as they did, we will recognize that our Lord's interpretation is as entirely wrong. This parable does not teach that, and never did. And that is not what is happening in our history. Our Lord did not interpret this parable to his disciples because he evidently expected them to know what the meaning was. In fact, a little later, when they were in the house, he asked them if they understood these parables meant and they said they did.

Jesus is using here a very common picture from any Hebrew household, and everyone present knew what it meant that this woman did an evil, and sneaky thing when she hid this leaven in the meal. So we should not react at this as they would have, with their background and their understanding of what these symbols meant.

Let's begin with the meal. It is the central thing in this story. The woman and the leaven both did not touch the three measures of meal. That is what our Lord is trying to get across to us. So the central question is "What does the meal represent?"

This crowd of Jews would know instantly what he had in mind because with their Judaistic background and training in the Old Testament, their minds would flash back immediately to one of the most common practices in Israel -- the meal offering, consisting of three measures of meal precisely prescribed to be unleavened without any yeast in it at all.

Very likely many of them would think back to the very first time the phrase "three measures of meal" was used in the Scriptures. It is in Genesis 18. Abraham was in his tent by the oaks of Mamre one day and went out the door and saw three strangers approaching. He went to meet them, for strangers were always in sight in those days and anyone passing by was offered hospitality. He welcomed them and offered them a meal according to the Scripture {Gen 18:6-7}, three measures of meal baked into bread which Sarah made in her tent while they were fellowshiping together out under the trees. During their conversation it suddenly came upon Abraham's astonished intelligence that God himself was visiting him, accompanied by two angels. This was the beginning of the use of the three measures of meal as a symbol.

What did it mean? It is clear that it became a symbol of the fellowship of God with his people and of fellowship with one another. Meal is a beautiful picture of commonality of life. In the Bible, it is always a picture of humanity, a humanity which is all alike. Just as each grain of cereal or meal is like all the other grains, people are alike and share in the same quality and nature. And they blend together to make something valuable. So, very early in the life of the Jewish people the three measures of meal became a symbol of the people of God sharing the life and the fellowship of God. So when the Old Testament people offered three measures of meal they were describing in beautifully picturesque language what was very precious in God's sight -- the oneness of God with his family, God with his people, the life they shared with each other under the Fatherhood of God.

Later on, in the book of Judges, when Gideon was suddenly confronted with the angel of God, he offered him an offering of three measures of unleavened meal. When Hannah, the mother of Samuel, went to the temple to offer a sacrifice, she offered three measures of meal.

God in the temple she took with her an offering of three measures of meal, unleavened. So this is a symbol throughout the Old Testament and it was familiar to these Jews to whom Jesus spoke. They instantly understood what he meant. It is we who tend to impose some artificial and foreign meaning upon things that are instantly understood that Jesus was talking about the fellowship of God with his people, a precious sight of the Lord, and about their oneness with each other as well.

You recall that in First Corinthians 1:9, Paul said to the church at Corinth that the key thing about Christians was that they were called unto the fellowship of God:

God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. {1 Cor 1:9 RSV}

That is the key to that great letter. That is what Christianity is all about. It is the sharing of the life together. We share his life and all that he is. And when John opens his first letter he says,

That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. {1 Jn 1:3 RSV}

So there is the meaning of the three measures of meal, the unleavened bread of sincerity, honesty, which is very precious to God that his people become honest and open and accepting toward one another, with nothing hidden between them. They are to understand one another, bear one another's burdens, help one another, and share together the life of God in their midst, the life of a living Lord. That is what was introduced into the world by bringing the gospel, this marvelous seed dropped into the heart of humanity which produces a willingness to be open and to stop hiding behind facades and to be honest in sharing the forgiving grace of Jesus Christ.

Now let's look at the leaven. The disciples would quickly recognize its meaning. It is used all throughout the Old Testament and it is always used the same way. Never once is leaven ever used as a symbol of anything good. Everyone in this crowd knew that this woman had no business putting leaven into these three measures of meal. That was to destroy the very meaning of this significant offering, for Scripture had taught that the three measures of meal were to be unleavened.

You remember that in Egypt, before the Jews ate the first Passover, God sent them all through the house with candles and lamps looking for leaven. They were to clear every bit of it out of the house lest it be put into the three measures of meal, or the Passover feast, and destroy the beauty of the symbolism. They searched meticulously, to look in corners, on shelves, and back in the closets. Perhaps this is where the custom of Spring house cleaning began, because Passover is in the spring. The Jewish people still do this as a result of that teaching way back in the time of Moses.

In the New Testament you find five distinct usages of leaven and they all mean something bad. Never does the Scriptures do leaven symbolize something good; it is always a type of something evil. Jesus spoke of leaven. He said to his disciples, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees," {Matt 16:6, 16:12; Luke 12:1}. And, lest we misunderstood what he meant Luke adds: "The leaven of the Pharisees is hypocrisy," {Luke 12:1}, i.e., pretending to be something you are not, pretending to a status before God which you do not actually possess, being phony, putting on an outward garb of religiosity but inwardly still having the same evil thoughts and angry moods and bitter attitudes. That is the leaven of the Pharisees -- hypocrisy.

Then Jesus spoke of the leaven of the Sadducees {cf, Matt 16:6-12}. That is rationalism, the idea that the world consists only of what you can taste and see and touch and smell and hear and think about, that there is nothing beyond that, no supernatural activity of God in life, no resurrection, no angels, no life after death. That is the leaven of the Sadducees -- rationalism.

And he spoke of the leaven of the Herodians, the followers of King Herod. Their leaven was materialism. They taught that the great value of life is to be powerful and wealthy. If you can acquire wealth and power, you have the secret of life. Many today are following the philosophy of the Herodians, holding the

what makes life worthwhile is the possession of things. That is evil, Jesus says. That is not the way to properly measure manhood or the value of a life.

In his epistles the Apostle Paul spoke of leaven. In First Corinthians 5 he cites the case of a man actually living in incest with his father's wife and Paul says that sexual immorality is leaven within destroying its fellowship. He goes on to say,

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven [ferments] the whole lump [of dough]? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new [fresh] dough] as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. {1 Cor 5:6-8 RSV}

There is what the bread stood for: sincerity, honesty, truth, and openness -- a recognition of one's transparency before each other. Anything which wrecks or ruins that or distorts it and puffs it up

Finally, in the book of Galatians {5:9}, Paul again speaks of leaven, this time in connection with legalism with trying to put people under the Law, under a set of rules by which to live, and expecting that the power to obey simply by their own effort. The very secret of the gospel is that Christ has come free from that. The world has been trying to live on that basis for centuries and it has never been free. Every effort to obey a rule and thus to satisfy God even with internal obedience, let alone external obedience, to failure before it begins if you are depending upon yourself for the necessary power. That way of life is called leaven. It too destroys the fellowship of God's people.

So leaven, obviously, is anything which disintegrates, breaks up, and corrupts, or causes a puffed-up condition, destroying honesty and obscuring reality. That is what yeast does when you put it into bread. A housewife says that it lightens the bread because it puffs it up, swells it up. At a certain point she stops the action of the yeast by baking the bread in the oven. But leavened bread will always spoil far more than unleavened. Leaven is disruptive and corrupting.

Now we come to the last symbol and the key question. Here we have these two elements:

- The fellowship of God's people which, as Jesus looked down the ages, he saw as something precious and important that he intended to introduce into society, and
- Something which corrupts that by introducing this five-fold evil of leaven into the fellowship.

Who does this? Who is this woman? Well, this may seem like a strange text for Father's Day but you know, have a little saying they use whenever trouble arises: "Clibberize the female." "Look for the woman." This may be the origin of that saying, I don't know.

Some of the commentators have tried to identify this with a specific woman in history and it is all sorts of things they have come up with. Some suggest it is Joan of Arc, believe it or not. She is supposed to have lost the fellowship of the church by introducing false doctrines. Others have said, No, it is Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science. It is amazing how many cults have been begun by women. I remember some people back in the '40s who identified it with Eleanor Roosevelt, of all people. It may be that we are tempted to say that this is the Woman's Liberation Movement introducing these evils.

But when a woman is used symbolically in Scripture it always means the same thing -- some religious authority either out of place or doing the wrong thing, some misuse of a relationship with God. It is the woman who belongs in the story. A woman is an authority in the home, one who had the right to prepare the bread of fellowship. This woman was in her rightful place, in her kitchen. It was her job to prepare the bread. But she had no right to hide leaven in it. And the very fact that she hid it indicates that this is something so important or crafty that she is trying to get away with, something she knew was wrong.

Now bring the picture together. Our Lord is looking down the centuries to follow and he sees the work which is most precious to God about the work which he himself has begun among mankind. This is the fellowship

God with his people, the sharing of life with each other and with God, the family of God, the one body of Christ, with all the members sharing life in openness and honesty together under the love

own lives and homes.

So they say to us, "What are you Christians talking about? What's the difference? What do you Christians have that we don't have -- without the inconvenience of having to go through all the rites you go through? What is so great about this message? Why doesn't it do something for you? Why should we believe in all the trouble of becoming a Christian when we can live the same way ourselves? We don't need the Bible or the Bible to teach us how to fight. We don't need the gospel to help us to be angry and resentful and divided against each other. We can do all that without it." And so there is an immediate loss of the message that we are proclaiming because there is no evidence of the witness of communion. What is missing is the oneness, the precious fellowship together of the people of God living the life of God.

Our Lord knew this would happen. He knew that leaven would appear within the church, allowed those who had the authority to keep it out if only they would.

First there came the leaven of the Pharisees -- hypocrisy. The Pharisees said that you please God if everything involving the externals of your life is right, when you watch your language so that you don't use blasphemous words and pay all your debts and keep up your church attendance, then everything is right. Your heart can be filled with all kinds of bitterness and hatred and enmity and lust and fear. But as long as you maintain outward appearances you are acceptable before God. That is a deadly bit of leaven and it destroys the warmth of the fellowship of God's people with himself and with each other. But that is what happens so often.

Remember how Ananias and Sapphira even though they were Christians began to pretend to a degree of dedication and commitment which they really did not have. God judged it to show us what that leaven at work and it destroyed, it brought sudden death into their midst, as it does into our lives every minute we try to pretend something.

This is what has happened to the meetings of the church. A spirit of formalism has come in. Formalism of making the exterior appear to be right while inwardly your heart can be anything that it may have.

nothing irreverent about visiting with one another, relating to each other, before or even after a service. It is nothing at all! It is what ought to be, in the presence of God. The idea that it is wrong to react in this way, to find out how people are and what they are doing and to pray with them a bit, is absolutely foreign to the New Testament concept of the church. The church is to love one another and to manifest this when they are gathered together. That which teaches the contrary is introducing the leaven of hypocrisy into the church.

You know how rampant legalism is in the church today. Christians are trying to control themselves and their children by law and not by grace, by trying to make a list of rules according to which people are to live. This is absolutely destructive of the Christian life. The idea has been that if we teach our children what is right, and we hold up before them a moral code or standard complete with all the little variations of our own making that we have added here and there -- that then we have discharged our responsibility as Christians. This is that basic and fundamental legalism, and it will produce rebellion -- as it is now and has been produced all along.

Law is necessary, of course, at the beginning of our children's lives in order to maintain order in the home, and the Scriptures teach this. But the whole idea of being parents -- and here I speak to fathers and mothers on this Father's Day -- the whole idea is to teach children that there is another basis from which they can react to situations. There is a basis not of demand that: "You must do this or I will not love you." I already love you, and whatever you do I will love you. Nothing is going to destroy our relationship. We have a relationship with God from which you can draw upon his strength and his grace to respond to the demands which life is requiring of you." That is what we are parents for -- to teach them that basis.

We need to remember that, as parents, our responsibility is to teach our children how to respond to the demands by what power, to teach them that Jesus Christ, living his life within us makes it possible to meet the demands. We must first demonstrate this as parents. Then we must teach it and explain it from the Scriptures. But without the demonstration the Scriptures will be meaningless. This is what is wrong in so many homes. There is no demonstration of the way to meet the pressures of life by faith in a living Lord. We haven't taught Christianity when you have merely held up the moral standard of the Ten Commandments. We have taught Christianity only when you have shown that Jesus died for us in order that he might impart to us that his life imparted to us is the basis from which we respond to his Law. Anything other than this is the leaven of legalism.

Then there is a leaven of rationalism -- and how that has come into the church! Men have forgotten that the Word of God is a revelation which God gives of truth that we could never know if he had not told us. Therefore it is superior to, and beyond, that which is available in our universities or anything that we can come up with out for himself. This Word of God sits in judgment upon that; not that upon this.

Then there is the leaven of materialism whereby many Christians have actually succumbed to the idea that the really important things in life are to have a fine home, and lovely luxuries, and a swimming pool, and three or four cars, etc. They build their lives around these things, aim at them as goals, and are disappointed and disenchanted and discontented if they cannot have them. And their children pick up the idea that these are the important things in life, and that your status and prestige in the community and your image before your neighbors are paramount. That is the leaven of materialism and it destroys this sweet fellowship.

Then there is the leaven of immorality, and how that spreads in a church! And yet, as any honest, knowledgeable psychologist can tell you, sex practiced outside of marriage is the most dangerous way to wreck and ruin a relationship. I have had scores and scores of young people sit in my study and confirm this to me. Again and again they have told me how a beautiful relationship was developing between two people, but then they went into sex and the development was arrested at that level, they never knew each other any more deeply than that. This is why God excludes sex outside marriage -- because it is the oneness of loving and growing together and precludes really knowing each other.

I am shocked, as you are, to hear how many churches are now taking a stand in defense of homosexuality, though this is to be accepted as a way of life. I don't think there is any more deadly thing we can do for those who are homosexuals than to take a stand like that, because it locks them into a pattern of defeat. There is no escape. The same applies to any other form of sexual deviancy or misbehavior. If any c

practices are accepted as something that is right they will spread like leaven, destroying all the fe the openness of God's people one with another and with the Father. The church is to understand who indulge in these things are in the grip of terrible, difficult problems and that love and grace o out to them and welcome them and put an arm around their shoulder and help them in their strug never compromise and say that this is something they have to live with. They don't have to live w

Christ has come to set us free from all forms of bondage, whether it be the bondage of legalism of a materialistic outlook, or whatever. Our Lord has come to set us free! That is what Christianit

What is the result of all this leaven that has come in? Well, we can see it abounding on every side People come to church. They listen, they sing a hymn, they stand at the right time, they bow their right angle, they close the book together, they sit down. They go through the motions, but there exchange of life. There is no oneness, no sense of openness, no acceptance, no forgiveness. And which are supposedly Christian are often filled with strife and bickering and fighting, even physical These things are the result of the leaven which has permeated and pervaded the body of Christ.

But God has made provision for being cleansed from leaven. By the forgiveness of the cross, by th method of admitting the facts and then accepting the forgiveness of God without any further quib washed, cleansed, and go on together from that point as free men and women, no longer in bond things but set free by the grace of God. We can then begin to be transparent and open once again

How wise our Lord is! How accurately he sees what is happening. How quickly and honestly our L put his finger upon the course of this age and shown us the very things which destroy and corru fellowship of the people of God. He warns us very clearly against allowing leaven to come into our fellowship.

And this word is addressed especially to those in authority and leadership within the church, for t the Word of truth will arrest the action of the leaven.

If the leaders of the church through the centuries had faithfully stuck with the Scripture and had is, these unhappy developments would have been prevented. But everywhere I go as a pastor tod to groups of other pastors, I find out that this is the great weakness -- pastors are not teaching are not instructing their people from the Word of God and teaching what it actually says about ho live together. They aren't saying a word about that. They are discussing remote doctrinal question their opinions on the social and political issues of the day instead of instructing in what the Bible aimed at -- the very personal lives of individuals and their relationships one with another. If the lea the church were carefully going over the Scriptures together with people, unfolding the Word of C whole effect of leaven would be greatly minimized within the body of Christ.

Thank God for those places all over the country today where pastors have reached the end of the it another way and are returning at last to the Word, beginning to unfold and proclaim it before th is the business of preaching -- to help people understand their lives in the light of the revelation o God so that together we might share openly and honestly and transparently before one another th and forgiveness of our Father in heaven.

So, when we are dismissed now, enjoy some fellowship with one another, won't you?

Say something to the person next to you. Don't just take him or her for granted. We are one tog Christ, and we need to know each other.

Let's pray together.

Prayer

Thank you, Father, for truth that opens our eyes, that reveals to us where we are. And th you, Lord, for the beautiful symbol of the fellowship of your people with each other and w

you which you have given us in the three measures of meal. Lord Jesus, you who have come into this world to break the strange and cold fetters which bind us away from one another away from the expression of love and life together, forgive us. Grant us, Lord, that in the life of every individual present here there may be a putting away of the leaven in order that the sweetness and beauty of your life may be evident in our midst and that we may love each other in the grace and forgiveness that you have given to us. Help us to lay hold of the heavenly grace of Jesus Christ our Lord and to be cleansed and made whole in his strength, by his grace. We ask in his name, Amen.

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THE CASE OF THE BURIED TREASURE

by Ray C. Stedman

In the great series of parables in Matthew 13 our Lord gave us, as he said, "The secrets of the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom of heaven is God's work among men, God's rule and authority in the midst of our affairs. In this series Jesus is revealing the work of the kingdom as it is going on throughout the world in this present age since his first coming and before his return. We come to the fifth parable this morning, the parable of the buried treasure.

I don't know what that may evoke in your mind. It always reminds me immediately of Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island of Long John Silver, and doubloons and pieces-of-eight, pegleg pirates, and all the exciting things usually associated with the idea of buried treasure. It is intriguing to realize that the Bible deals with this subject as well. It recognizes the allure and the mystery which always gathers around the idea of hidden treasure. God has his buried treasures and he is speaking of them in this parable.

But the exciting thing about Scripture is that in it we are always dealing with fact, not fancy. The Bible affords us a glimpse behind the scenes of history into factors and forces which are at work today and which would never be reported on the pages of the newspaper. And yet they are extremely controlling factors in our events. Through the pages of the Word of God we are afforded tremendous insights into life. I hope you will open your Bibles without the sense that here is a book which gives you vital, inside information which you can get from no other source and which will help you to understand yourself, and life, and the mystery of God more than you possibly could in any other way.

The first four parables, at which we have already looked, were delivered by the Sea of Galilee on a memorable occasion when Jesus spoke to a great crowd who gathered about him. The crowd was moved out from shore in a boat to be able to speak to them and teach them these parables. But we should recognize that the parable of the treasure hidden in the field is the first of a series of three which are given in connection with the other four and on the same day, but, as Matthew is careful to tell us, he gave these to the disciples alone after they had gone back into the house. They are part of the whole series of seven parables which were given only to the disciples, and there is something significant about that.

The first four stories were given to the unbelieving seaside crowd. They concern those aspects of the kingdom of heaven at work among men which are readily recognizable and visible in history. But these last three were spoken only to the men of faith, the disciples, who were ready to believe what God said. They concern those aspects which are not quite as easily seen in the historical process.

You remember that in the first parable our Lord informed us by means of the story that he would have a great sowing of the Word of God throughout the world and that it would fall on four kinds of hearts. There would be a partial failure of the seed of the Word because of the conditions of some of the hearts that would fall. But there would be one kind of heart in which the seed would grow up into a harvest and produce fruit.

Then, building on that, in the second parable the Lord said that he would take the sons of the kingdom that are produced by the seed of the Word, and sow them like wheat throughout the world. He has been doing so ever since, sending men into all parts of the earth and into all levels of society, among all kinds of people, putting them there in order that there may be a testimony of the Word. But in that same parable the enemy would come and sow tares, or weeds, and these would grow up right alongside the wheat. Through the course of history, there has been a counterfeit Christianity, a sham religion, a phony, which bears the name of Christianity but which is absolutely false. These two would grow up together, and sometimes would be difficult to distinguish, especially at the beginning, but eventually would make their nature known. This has certainly proved true in history.

And then our Lord said in the third parable that there would be an abnormal and an unnatural growth of a seed that he planted. It would grow into an ungainly tree with many great branches, a powerful, imposing structure that would attract birds of prey, evil men who would come into the church and build their thrones, i.e., establish their authority there, and thus would produce something entirely different than the simple, pungent, but low-profile approach to humanity that the Lord desired.

Finally, there was the parable of the woman who took leaven and introduced it into the three measures of flour by which Jesus made clear that something would destroy the precious fellowship of the people of God. It would be allowed into the church by the very people who were appointed to keep it out. All this happened exactly as our Lord said and all of it is visible in history.

Now we turn to these three private parables given to the disciples:

- The parable of the hidden treasure,
- The parable of the pearl of great price, and
- The parable of the dragnet.

I want to read these twin parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price because they are so closely together, although we will look only at the first one this morning. In Verses 44 and 45 Jesus said:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. {Matt 13:44-46 RSV}

You can see that these parables are very much alike. They each have the element of a man who discovers something valuable and sells all that he has and buys it. They fit together but they are not talking about the same thing.

A great misinterpretation of these parables has developed, quite without any basis in the systematic interpretation of symbols in Scripture, which has hidden their true meaning. (As we saw last time, the leaven also has been misconstrued to mean something quite different from what our Lord intended.) The usual interpretation of these parables is that Christ is the hidden treasure and that he is the pearl of great price. And as we go through life we are the people who some day discover him. Then it is up to us to give up all that we have, give it all up, and buy him at any cost. But I submit to you that that is false, and that never, anywhere in Scripture is salvation ever offered to us as something we have to buy, or can we be absolute paupers in God's sight. We have nothing to offer him, nothing that we can give in return. Salvation is offered to us as a free gift, entirely by the grace of God. No one can ever give all that he has in order to purchase Jesus Christ because he has nothing to give in the first place. Therefore, we will not spend

time on that misinterpretation, but will come right to the heart of what the story of the treasure field really means.

Notice that there are two things in this story which are immediately recognizable because we have seen them before. There is a man, and there is a field. So we already have clues as to what these mean.

- The man in these parables is always Jesus himself. He has previously identified himself as the Son of Man figure.
- And the field, he has told us, is the world, the world of humanity, the human race, all of so

With these clues that our Lord himself has given us, we now have the key to the understanding of why Jesus came, he says, and found a treasure hidden in humanity. Something was hidden, lost in the world, but he uncovered it. And then he did an amazing thing. He covered it up again, buried it again. The Son of Man and gave all that he had and bought that field of humanity.

Immediately we are asking ourselves, "What is this treasure?" That is what our Lord wants us to discover. One of the fascinating things about studying Scripture, especially in a series of parables, is to try to answer questions like that -- to seek to fit the puzzle of the parable to the pattern of life, and see where they correspond. Something is hidden in the world. It was hidden when our Lord came. He uncovered it but buried it again. Now it is hidden once more. And there it remains until our Lord's return. Now, what is it?

Well, is it not obvious that there is something lost with relation to humanity, something every human being seems to be seeking, consciously or unconsciously, something every thinking person in this room is seeking throughout the world is searching for and longing for with an ache that is almost physical? Men have been seeking it for centuries. They have erected great organizations to try to bring it about, to produce it, to find the treasure. The United Nations exists for this very purpose. The Communists claim that they have found it. Western democracies say that they have found it. But it is very evident that neither has found it. What would it be?

The treasure is the secret of international peace, of harmony among the nations. You see, as our Lord indicates, it is something related to the field, to humanity. And it is hidden within that human field. The Son of Man had to buy the field in order to get the treasure. That treasure is the lost secret of how to get along with other nations, how to discover peace and prosperity and happiness and all the many results of peace that men have been seeking after for centuries.

This week I was talking with Bill Gwinn, the director of Mt. Hermon Christian Conference Center. He has recently been in Washington, D. C., spending some time with a young congressman who is a mutual friend of mine. He told me that this congressman had said that the House of Representatives today is struggling with a question: What is the relationship between peace in the individual heart and peace between nations? How do you get peace -- and how do you move from one to the other? They know there is some kind of tie between the two, but they don't know what it is. This congressman said that Congress is really wrestling with this issue and is deeply involved in it. (You see, congressmen don't spend all their time smoking cigars and kissing women.) The word peace is on everyone's lips today. There are banners and placards everywhere you go in America, all crying out for peace. And Congress is trying to put its finger on where you begin and how you relate the peace in an individual to peace among men. How do you find this secret?

I was reminded by that conversation of the words of the Secretary General of the United Nations. Some time ago, in addressing a crowd of 2,500 delegates from 57 countries of the world who were gathered to find some way to world peace, he said these remarkable words:

"What element is lacking so that with all our skill and all our knowledge we still find ourselves in the dark valley of discord and enmity? What is it that inhibits us from going forward together to enjoy the fruits of human endeavor and to reap the harvest of human experience? Why is it that for all our professed ideals, our hopes, and our skills, peace on earth is still a distant objective seen only dimly through the storms and turmoils of our present difficulties?"

There is an honest cry from the harassed heart of a statesman who is desperately trying to find the treasure that is hidden in man, the secret of world peace.

If you want to put that treasure into one word, as revealed by the Scriptures, the nation of Israel. I am sure that these disciples understood this because they were Jews themselves, and the word of

But the wonderful thing the Lord tells us here is that he has not given up his purpose. God has not given up on Israel. In this little parable he reveals that he came and found this treasure, the secret of world peace and prosperity, hidden in this nation. Yet they had lost the secret of their own lives. So he unfolded it to them and they hid it again. Then he covered it over again when it was rejected by the people. But then the parable says, "In his joy the man went and gave all that he had and bought the field." And in those words, "he gave all that he had," the mystery of the darkness of the cross of Jesus Christ is implied. They bring to mind the words of Philippians 2: "Though he was equal with God he did not count it a thing to be held on to But he

Romans 11. Paul says of Israel,

So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall?

In these two parables our Lord is telling us the reasons for the cross. The pearl is different than the treasure and yet for both the Lord gave all that he had.

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, how we thank you for the marvelous truth that you, Lord, have bought the world, that it belongs to you, and that you shall some day rule and reign in power and glory in its midst and all your promises shall be fulfilled. We pray, Lord Jesus, that we may all apply this to our lives, and that we may understand that you desire to heal us and bring us right now into an experience of joy and glory and gladness and fruitfulness. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: The Case of the Buried Treasure

Series: Secrets of the Spirit

Scripture: Matt 13:44

Message No: 6

Catalog No: 457

Date: June 27, 1971

THE CASE OF THE VALUABLE PEARL

by Ray C. Stedman

We turn again this morning to the marvelous secrets our Lord is telling us in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. They unveil to us things we would never know about history if he had not told us about these secrets of the kingdom of heaven, the mysteries of God at work in this present age. As we have been studying in past weeks we have seen how accurately our Lord foresaw and foretold all that has happened in the last twenty centuries of Christian life. Now we come to the sixth parable, usually termed "the parable of the pearl of great price," found in Verse 45:

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." {Matt 13:45-46 RSV}

Note that this links very closely with the one preceding it, the parable of the treasure hidden in the field. In the first parable the man found and covers up again and then went and sold all that he had and bought the field. We saw that together last week. And, as we saw, there is a common misinterpretation of these two parables. The treasure and the pearl are Jesus Christ; we are the men who are seeking for them. When we find them we must sell all that we have in order that we might have him. But this is a mistaken interpretation because it makes both these parables mean exactly the same thing, and our Lord never wastes words but also because there is no sense in which the gospel, salvation, the gift of Jesus Christ, is ever purchased. Scripture as capable of being bought by anyone. The Lord has come to offer himself to us as God's healing gift. He can never be purchased. There is no way that we can earn our way into his presence. We can have that which cannot be bought. Therefore we must set aside that common misinterpretation.

age. So it is Jesus, then, who comes as a merchant seeking fine pearls.

This is an oriental picture. It is true that the Hebrew people never valued pearls. One of the strange things about the Old Testament is that, though you find many jewels and gems mentioned there, diamonds and sapphires and topazes and agates, you will find no mention of a pearl. For some reason the Hebrews did not think much of them. But these disciples were Galileans, and Galilee was a region to which many Gentiles came. So they were familiar with Gentile traders who came looking for valuable pearls and would pay fabulous prices for them in order to purchase them -- not for themselves but for their

So the disciples understood the symbol our Lord is using here: A merchant comes seeking pearls of great value. In order to obtain it, he must sell all that he has and buy it. This is obviously the same activity as in the parable of the treasure hidden in the field of humanity. We saw that the treasure is Israel, and that it embodies the ultimate solution to the problem of establishing world peace and that Israel comes into a right relationship with its Messiah and Lord, there is no way men can work out international relationships. This does not mean that it is wrong to try. It is perfectly right to do so. The activity of an organization like the United Nations as an attempt to try to solve this problem is not wrong. It is to hold war in check. But the Word tells us again and again that they do not know the secret and we do not know it until Israel comes into its own.

To bring that nation into its own, as we saw last week, the Lord Jesus came and gave all that he had to purchase the field so that he might one day bring to pass world prosperity and peace. We saw that all that he had is a picture of the cross of our Lord. He gave himself. As Isaiah so beautifully expressed, "He poured out his soul unto death," {Isa 53:12 KJV}. As Paul says, "He emptied himself," {Phil 2:7 RSV}. He exhausted his treasury, he pauperized himself, he gave all that he had, literally and truly, in order to purchase the field containing that treasure.

Now we come to another aspect of the work of the cross. We need only ask ourselves, "What does God value in this world?" -- in order to discover what this pearl means. For what did he give all that he has in order to obtain it? The obvious answer is: The church. Our Lord came to the world, and, seeing the church as God sees it, with his view of history -- already complete and worth so much, he gave all that he had so that he might obtain it. I am sure that Paul had this very parable in mind when he wrote to the Ephesians:

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ... that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. {Eph 5:25b, 5:27 RSV}

Why did our Lord choose the symbol of the pearl for the church? Why didn't he use the ruby or the diamond or any other jewel? The answer is that the pearl is the only jewel which is the product of living matter. It is the response of an oyster to something which causes it injury. A pearl grows out of hurt. You know how a pearl is formed. A little particle of sand or some other irritating substance gets inside the oyster and it is like cracker crumbs in bed -- constantly irritating. The oyster has no hands with which to brush the irritant out, no means of defense except to transform that thing that is injuring it. What a beautiful symbol our Lord has chosen here for the church! I was tempted in thinking through the parable to label this "The Case of the Irritated Oyster" because the response of an oyster to that irritant is to transmute it and transform it into something which is no longer a source of irritation. This is what our Lord came to do, and, in order to accomplish it, he gave all that he had.

Nothing we have considered up to this point has begun to exhaust the implications of that vast price that he gave all that he had and bought it." I wonder if any of us at any time fully grasp the significance of that price. We have tried to think through the sacrifice of Jesus. Oftentimes we think of it as a kind of commercial transaction -- "The Lord paid the price" -- as though he were merely making a purchase in a marketplace. Our words of redemption are sometimes rather crass. Or we dwell upon the agony of the cross, its physical hurt, the injury, the pain, the thirst, the tears, the darkness, the death. Our Lord went through all that, but we have not even remotely touched the deepest significance of the cross when we deal with it on the physical level. We won't begin to understand it until we see something of the personal emotional experience of the

when he entered into the human family, became one with us, and in the cross identified himself with us and shame and sorrow and heartache. It is easy even to sing about the wounds and the blood, the pain, but that doesn't begin to touch the depth of what this phrase means. It goes far, far deeper. It involves the hurt in the heart of God as he fully identifies with us in all our agony and extends forgiveness to us.

Healing human hurt is God's business. The cross is God's answer to the hurt humanity has caused by the hurting race we belong to. Who is not aware of that? I suggest that no generation has ever been so hurt as this one of the hurt of human hearts. All of us hurt ourselves and we hurt each other. We do it, but we do. The very efforts we make to try to satisfy ourselves, and to meet our needs, we find are damaging us in many ways. Yet in ignorance we go right on doing the things that are hurting and hurting ourselves and each other as well.

Every family, every individual bears deep and abiding heartache. Sometimes it is very evident on the face. Most of it is due to the fact that we suffer from guilt, a sense of condemnation and self-hate. That is why we have such a deep and abiding sense of being a failure. But this is what the cross is all about. It is the hurt in the human race, all the agony and misery of our struggle to try to live properly without understanding the secrets of doing so. He wanted to do something about that, but he had a problem -- a problem that everyone of us is familiar with.

I am sure that you all have had someone try to "help" you to stop doing something which they saw you were doing and was injuring you. But if they came with a self-righteous attitude, placing themselves on a level above you, and began to correct you while implying that they couldn't understand how you could get into that difficulty because they would never do a thing like that -- you know what your reaction would be. You would immediately be filled with resentment and would not hear a word they said. Instead of listening to what they were saying in order to try to open your eyes, you would have your hackles raised and would be very defensive. Everything they might say would only increase your resentment, and hostility, and sense of being wrong. This is a mistake we parents frequently make with our children. We approach them in a spirit of condemnation and of blame.

And if self-righteousness on the part of a human being can cause that kind of a reaction in someone, how can we render them utterly unable to be helped, how much more does the true righteousness of God frighten us when we think of having to deal with him? As Isaiah put it, "Who among us can dwell with the everlasting burnings?" {Isa 33:14 RSV}. Who can stand in the presence of the holiness of God and feel the greatness of his righteous being, his spotless life, and not feel condemned, wiped out? If God comes to us in his holiness and righteousness we immediately feel that we cannot stand it. That is why man has fled God and has tried to deal with him, has tried to shove him out of his thinking. We are afraid of a God like that.

So how could he reach us? In order to gain us, in order to form the pearl which he so desperately loves and cherishes, he came and gave all that he had. That means that he took our place. He came into our place. He came into the place of hurt and agony and heartache and loneliness and sorrow and shame and darkness, and became what we are.

There is no greater commentary on this phrase than that in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 5, Verse 21: "He who knew no sin was made sin for us." Sin is merely a label by which we gather up all our terrible wrongdoing and the aching, hurting, lonely misery of mankind. When Jesus came, without any contribution to this on his own part ("he who knew no sin"), nevertheless in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross he entered fully into what we feel. He felt the hurt. He knew the aching loneliness, the heartache, the misery, the rejection, the sense of despair, of self-loathing, of emptiness and worthlessness, of meaninglessness, and the awful hostility that sin engenders. He felt the condemnation of a righteous God. He entered into all of that. He gave all that he had in order that, when he comes to us in the midst of our pain, he might be able to say, "I know just how you feel. I've been right there. I know exactly what you are going through. I understand. I know what it has done to you and I want to show you what I've learned from this." And he can put his loving hand upon us and begin to lead us out. "Though he were a Son, yet he learned obedience through the things which he suffered," {cf, Heb 5:8}. Thus he gave all that he had so that he could heal the hurt of humanity.

What symbol of that more perfect than a pearl could ever be given? Something hurts an oyster, but the response is to transform and transmute the injurious object, covering it with a soft and delicate nacre built up layer by layer until it forms a lustrous and shining and beautiful jewel. That is what our Lord has chosen as a symbol of the church.

You can see how true it is. We are the ones who have wounded our Lord, as in that hymn we often sing:

Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be that
Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

That is what Jesus is telling us in this parable. He came and give all that he had so that he might take the hurt of humanity into his own heart, might know the aching agony of all that we go through, and might be able to touch us, to heal us, and to minister to us by beginning to clothe us with his own beauty, taking his own life, out of his wounded side, to wash away with his own blood our wounds, our sins, our guilt, and to cleanse us and impart his life to us so that we might become more and more like him. That is what the grain of sand, the irritating substance, the cause of injury, is transmuted. The unsightly is transformed into something of beauty. And that is the action of love.

John Oxenham once wrote a little poem which catches up our Lord's attitude. It becomes our attitude as we learn how to live as a Christian. He said of a friend who had injured him,

He drew a circle that shut me out,
Rebel, heretic, a thing to flout.
But God and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

That is Christianity. That is what our Lord has done. He has reached out to us and is healing the human hearts by giving all that he had.

Now tie these two parables together: Our Lord is showing us what he is doing in this present age between his two advents. Israel, he said, is going to be hidden again in the world of humanity. Her governments will stumble on in blindness and folly, ever dreaming of world peace, never able to find it, never knowing that the secret of it lies in a little nation in one obscure corner of the world, which was lost and forgotten, which is only now beginning gradually to come to life, and which still does not know the secrets of its own nature. But, because of that treasure, our Lord bought the world, so that the earth should be filled with righteousness as the waters cover the sea, and all the glowing, beautiful things of the prophets should be fulfilled.

I love to turn to the thirty-second chapter of Isaiah and some of the other great passages which describe which he describes in such magnificent language the glory of a restored earth when the desert shall be like the rose and the curse shall be removed from nature and from the animal world. The lion shall feed with the lamb, the cow with the bear shall feed, and a little child shall lead them. All this is coming. The mountains shall be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Men shall live in peace and harmony under his own fig tree. The burdens shall be lifted from the weary shoulders of mankind and the glory of the earth shall come. There is a beautiful passage in the Song of Solomon which says,

"for lo, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land." {Song 2:11-12 RSV}

That is what the treasure shall do and to that end our Lord gave all that he had.

strong. His strength is made perfect in my weakness," {cf, 2 Cor 12:9-10}.

As these trials come to us, God is preparing us to be an instrument for untold blessing in the corners throughout the far-flung reaches of His great, unfettered universe -- so as to manifest and demonstrate the immeasurable riches of His grace. You and I have a part in that. Keep that clearly in mind, as God calls us to do when he says, "put on the helmet of salvation" {Eph 6:17}, the hope of the eternal purpose which will keep your mind straight and hold you steady in the midst of the pressures and varying circumstances of this present hour. As Paul says, "This slight, momentary affliction is preparing for us a far more abundant and eternal weight of glory," {cf, 2 Cor 4:17}.

Now, the world knows nothing of this. You will never see this heralded in the pages of your newspapers or some magazine like Time or Newsweek. They do not understand God's purposes. But God sees history differently than we. We see a long record of civilizations and kingdoms and battles, of exploration and discoveries, etc. But those are only the merest incidentals. God looks at history and sees the hurt and heartache and pain and anguish. He sees the healing of love and the understanding of grace. And something is being formed -- a marvelous, magnificent pearl which shall be shining and flashing in the heavens in places throughout all the ages to come as a testimony through all eternity of the glory and the goodness of God.

So that is the pearl of great price. No wonder someone has called this earth of ours "God's treasure." Hidden in it is the treasure of the field, which shall bring to pass at last the hopes and the dreams of world peace. And hidden also is this marvelous mystery of the pearl, which shall at last accomplish God's purposes in planets and stars and solar systems far beyond our own, in that great day when God reveals all that he has in mind.

Prayer

We thank you, our heavenly Father, that your love and grace has planned and provided for us throughout all the eternal future. Thank you for lifting our eyes above the mediocre, above the daily routine of our lives, above all the hurt and the anguish of our days, and for helping us to see that a great and mighty purpose is being worked out and that we have a part in it, that our lives have meaning, that we move to an appointed end, that you are accomplishing your will through the things that we experience. Thank you for that healing of love and grace which transmutes and transfigures the very thing that injures us and makes it into a thing of beauty. Help us not to reject your ministry to us but to accept it and to give thanks for it. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: The Case of the Valuable Pearl
Series: Behind the Scenes of History
Scripture: Matt 13:45-46
Message No: 7
Catalog No: 458
Date: July 4, 1971

THE CASE OF THE GREAT DRAGNET

by Ray C. Stedman

We come now to the seventh and last in the series of our Lord's parables recorded in Matthew. These parables convey what Jesus calls "the secrets of the kingdom of heaven," the mysteries of what is going on behind the scenes of history in the age in which we live, the age which began with Jesus' first coming.

end with his second. As we look back over this series we can see through the eyes of our Lord what has been happening in our present age. We can see the history of this age as God sees it and understand something of what he is accomplishing through it. We are still involved in it, and thus meaning for us.

You remember that Jesus told us that the age would be characterized by a sowing of truth. There is the spreading of the ultimate message of reality. That is exactly what the gospel is. The good news is telling men what the lost secret of their humanity is. That is what the gospel is all about. It is a call to human hearts that the cause of all their misery, and the aching, the longing, and the loneliness of that they are not operating according to the provision, nor on the program, which God intended from the beginning. That provision is God himself, living within man, invited into our lives by faith, received in Jesus our Savior and Lord. The good news is that God has found a way, despite our rejection, to bring us back again and to open up our eyes to see and understand it.

That message has been sown throughout the world, as our Lord made clear in the first parable. Some will receive it -- not everyone, but some -- and those who would receive it would begin to grow and blossom into the kind of men and women that God had in mind in the beginning.

Then in the second parable Jesus told us that there would be a scattering throughout the whole world of people who had responded to the truth of the gospel. The Lord said he would be responsible to provide for those people throughout the whole structure of humanity, geographically and socially -- in every tribe and nation around the world and in every class of society.

Some weeks ago I attended a conference in the mountains of Southern California with a group from Los Angeles made up largely of middle-class American citizens. But a young man and his wife arrived dressed in leather jackets with emblems emblazoned on the backs. They rode up on motorcycles. Both had long hair and were known for all the world like Hell's Angels. I found out that indeed they had been Hell's Angels and that they were now living and traveling and working with them. But these two have become Christians, and now their ministry is to the Hell's Angels. They perform it at great risk to themselves. They told me that after they became Christians the other members of the gang gathered around, and said, "Look, we don't mind you getting religion. We don't even mind your talking to us about it. But you'd better never be phony. If we ever sense that you're putting us on, we'll kill you!"

Now that is quite a challenge -- to minister under those terms. And I want to confess immediately that I am that none of you have ever put my ministry to you on that basis. But that is testimony to the Lord who is to sow his people wherever he wants them to be. This is what has been happening throughout history.

through history this has been the case. Impediments to a consistent walk with the Lord have been disharmony, discord, and turmoil have arisen between individuals and groups and factions of genuine believers, just as Jesus warned.

Then there were the two parables of the treasure hidden in the field and of the valuable pearl, which together, give us the purpose of the cross, the reason why Jesus died. He came and gave all that order that he might purchase the field of humanity which contains the treasure of the secret of world prosperity. And that secret, we saw, is bound up in a tiny nation, Israel, which has been brought into being in very recent times. It is now very much in the forefront of human events, occupying the center stage in current history, as the world is only now becoming dimly aware. All this is happening because it has a purpose for that nation. And when he teaches them again the secret of their own lives there will be a time of world peace and prosperity of which the prophets have spoken.

Jesus also gave all that he had in order to purchase the valuable pearl of a redeemed humanity, to give to individuals the secret of peace and of meaning in life and thus to fashion a new community, a whole of people who would have a wonderful purpose far beyond this life and beyond this planet in God's program for the ages. This is the pearl of great price, which is the church.

That brings us to the parable of the great dragnet. These are Jesus' words:

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; when it was full men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." {Matt 13:47-50}

I don't suppose we could get any introduction to this parable better than those well-known notes which introduced the television serial of the same name. Remember how they go?

dummmm!
dumda-
Dum-
dum!

That program, by the way, captured the intent of this parable better than any commentary I have seen. It was about a police dragnet which swept through the city of Los Angeles and would capture all kinds of people to be investigated, to have either their badness or goodness in the eyes of the law. That is exactly what this parable is about. Incidentally, it was located in the right place, the City of Los Angeles, because in the parable our Lord associates angels with the judgment.

This is a description of what is going on in our present day. This lost secret of the kingdom of heaven is characteristic of the gospel which forces individuals out into the open where they manifest what they are. There is an element of the gospel, this radical message of Christianity, which exposes people when they come into contact with it. It makes known what they are, just as a great dragnet sweeping through the sea and catching fish of every kind ultimately exposes whether they are good or bad, as our Lord makes clear. This is what is happening throughout our age. The radical truth of the gospel is like a net seining through the tide of surging humanity, and whoever is caught in it is forced to declare himself, forced out into the open where he is, whether he is bad or good.

Now do not misunderstand. Obviously, people are not simply born bad or good. We are all part of the same race. We are all born into lost humanity. We all have evil at work within us and that evil will create in each of us a character a resistance to truth, if God does not intervene. We are all in that condition. Bad or good is not a matter of birth, but of response. The parable, refers to how we respond to truth, to what happens when we come into contact with reality. The good are those who deal honestly with this reality, who when they see something real and genuine about it respond to it, act on it, do something about it. The bad are those who

best, turn their backs to it and say, "No, I don't like that and I don't want to believe it; therefore else, at worst, play the hypocrite and say, "Yes, I'll accept that," but yet allow it to make no change in your life and remain essentially evil within although outwardly they put on a pious garb of sanctimonious self-righteousness. That is what this parable is talking about.

Life presents many illusions. We do not always perceive the difference between truth and falsehood. Even the youngest among us, have learned that you cannot trust everything you see. Many ideas propounded today as being delightful and capable of bringing you happiness. But when you grasp them, they are like cobwebs and they crumble to nothing, to dust in your hands, and you are left frustrated, and disappointed, shattered and defeated. Life consists of trying to sort out the illusions from the truth, attempting to distinguish between fantasy and the real thing.

The truth is that man was created to be indwelt by God. The only way we can fulfill our humanity is to be filled with God and to understand that we are to live, to operate, by faith in him. The gospel message is good news about the lost secret of humanity, about the fact that Christ in you is able to restore to you the God ever intended you to have, is like a great net sweeping through the tides of humanity. Whoever is in it is made to reveal what kind of people they are, to reveal whether they will deal honestly with the truth, whether they will reject it and turn from it. You can see this process in your own life, in your own experience. You can see it in the record of church history. You can see it working itself out in human events. The gospel has this radical character about it.

You remember that when Paul spoke to the Athenians on Mars Hill, to the thinkers and philosophers of that great pagan city where the people were given over to superstition and to the worship of false gods, he said to them,

"The times of ignorance when the foolish worshipping of false ideas and following after false gods [God overlooked their ignorance] but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by [Jesus] whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead." {Acts 17:30-31 RSV}

What did he mean by that? Well, Paul's phrase "but now" does not refer to a moment in history but to a crisis point in the experience of each individual. We are all born into ignorance. We all grow up following false gods, committed to wrong ideals, and operating on false principles. Ah, but when you hear the truth of the gospel, when the reality of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, strikes you and you understand that through the resurrection of Jesus, God has demonstrated before all the world that there is available a wholly new way of life, that there is a new provision for man, and that in Jesus Christ is found the lost secret of humanity. When you learn that, then you have arrived at a crisis point, then you have to do something about it, to act on it or reject it, one or the other.

And then you will be different. It will drive you one way or the other. If you believe it, and act upon it, you will never be the same again. It will change everything about your life, gradually, little by little, as you apply it to various areas. If you reject it, you will never be the same again. You will either be constantly playing the hypocrite, becoming more pious outwardly and more devilish inwardly, or you will turn your back on Christianity altogether and go your own way to become a blatant atheistic philosopher, spreading propaganda against God everywhere you go. That is what Jesus is saying. His dragnet exposes the truth in your heart toward the truth.

You can see that in the passage which we read earlier this morning from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 2, Verses 14-16: He says,

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing to one a fragrance

active, but their activity has been behind the scenes. Wherever angels are at work there is unseen divine activity with visible and yet otherwise unexplainable results. Oftentimes something happens in our affairs which cannot be explained by the people who make it their business to study and analyze the human reactions and thoughts. They can only record it, but do not know why it is happening. That is the manifestation of some kind of angelic activity.

Jesus says that is what is going to happen at the close of the age. Increasingly, inexplicably, there are divisions into groups, either evil or good. This links closely with the parable of the wheat and the tares. Jesus also said that the angels would divide men, that clusters of evil men would gather together and the righteous would do the same. Here Jesus says that the angels will come and separate the evil from the righteous and what people actually are will become plain to all.

In other words, as we draw near to the end of the age hypocrisy is going to be more and more difficult going to be harder to pretend to be a Christian. People will be more and more driven into an open confession of the evil that is within and no longer able to cloak it with some form of outward righteousness. This is the result of angelic activity, exposing the bad in order that it might be destroyed, and allowing the good to remain for the harvest of God, just as this parable makes very clear.

I am not at all certain how this is going to work out. Our Lord does not give us the details of how things will actually appear in history. But I am sure this trend will occur. In fact it may well be occurring right now. The issues are becoming increasingly clear and it is not as easy as it used to be to hide behind a facade of counterfeit Christianity. The reality must be there. The whole trend in our day toward honesty, toward a whole generation for reality and genuineness, is probably the result of the activity of angels moving toward this final manifestation.

Notice that our Lord closes with a very solemn word:

"The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." {Matt 13:49b-50 RSV}

Weeping speaks of remorse and sorrow. Gnashing of teeth speaks of frustration and hostility and all gathered up in the burning phrase "the furnace of fire." I do not know fully what that means. As I like judgment any more than you do. I have always been uneasy whenever I have had to deal with passages which speak of hell and judgment, of death and of the wrath of God. I do not like them. I don't like to think that God will have to do this one of these days. But I have been helped greatly by recognizing that, in the New Testament, the one who speaks most often and most solemnly about hell and wrath and flames, etc., is Jesus himself. The One with the outstretched arms, with the compassionate heart, who longs to heal sick and wounded humanity, is the One who speaks also about the ultimate fate of those who turn their backs and refuse the healing grace of God.

So we must live with this passage the way it is. Our Lord is simply indicating that the issue sharpens as we draw to the close of the age and that at the end it will no longer be possible to hide. As he himself says in another connection, "That which is hidden shall be revealed. That which is spoken in closets shall be proclaimed from the housetops." That which has been hidden in obscurity and which we think we have gotten away with shall be exposed before the gaze of all. Nothing shall be hidden. Everything shall be uncovered. That is the way this parable moves toward.

The final question which it leaves with us is this: Are you really changed by your contact with Jesus? Or are you still changing?

Everyone in this congregation in one way or another has had a contact, a touch, with Jesus, has heard his voice. What has it done to you?

What has happened? Are you gradually moving more and more into wholesomeness, into health of mind and body, a departure from childish ideas and actions? Are you becoming genuine and loving and concerned for others?

Or does your form of Christianity leave you unchanged within, outwardly pious and respectable, a part of the Christian community, singing the hymns, attending the meetings, doing all the expected inwardly just as bitter and resentful, just as self-centered and concerned for your own ends, seeking prestige and favor and advancement just as much as you always have been, perhaps more difficult at home? That is what this parable is driving at.

When we are dealing with God we are not dealing with someone who can be bought off. We are dealing with the ultimate reality, striking deep into our lives and exposing whatever it finds. And the only way we can deal with reality with any possibility of survival and chance of acceptance is with honesty, simple honesty, just what we are. Because, when we say that, then the healing glory of Jesus Christ is able to take up the evil from our hearts and restore the good, to change us into the kind of people that we want to be, which God wants us to be.

As we come to the close of this searching parable we need to pray David's great prayer:

Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting! {Psa 139:23-24 RSV}

That is the only ground upon which ultimately we can stand before our Lord. The final, ultimate test is the searching one. Our Lord describes it again in Matthew 25 in his story of the separation of the sheep and the goats when he comes again. The test is, "Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these men, you have done it unto me," {cf, Matt 25:40}. Inasmuch as your inward motivation, your whole heart has been awakened with compassion for those who are hungry and sick and in prison, etc., then you have been changed. But if your brand of Christianity is only that of mere outward form, of respectability, a certain standard, a degree of a "live and let live" attitude, and yet you have no compassion, no willingness to give and expend yourself to meet the need of someone else, then you have never been changed. God has no work of grace in your heart. This is where this parable leaves us.

As we bring this study to a close, we can see how our Lord has clearly and completely captured all the trends of our day and our age. He brings us at last now to stand naked and open before him, and the truth is made clear. Our only hope is to say, "Lord, here I am. I cannot change myself. I can only admit you and put myself in your hands. And you, Lord, can change me."

Prayer

We ask you now, Lord Jesus, to measure each heart and show each of us what our own heart is. May there be many who will pray, "Lord Jesus, change me. I am just what I am, and I cannot change myself. But I do not want to be what I am any longer. Lord, please change me." Many of us are Christians already, Lord, and we really have believed in you. But there are areas of our lives in which we are still resisting you, still trying to pretend that we are something we are not. So we ask you, Lord Jesus, to change those areas too, to redeem them. Help us to acknowledge them and claim your healing grace. We ask in your name, Amen.

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HOW TO HANDLE LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

In recent weeks we have been looking together at the great series of parables recorded in the third chapter of Matthew by which our Lord Jesus has unfolded the way God works in the affairs of men -- especially during this present age. As we have examined these parables one by one we have seen that they are the movements and events which history now records as having taken place. The very things which Jesus predicted would happen have happened through this present age. As we are drawing toward its close now we can see how fully accurate his words are.

Last week we studied the seventh and last of the parables, and perhaps you felt that we were through with this passage. But this morning we want to pick up the very revealing postscript or epilogue which Jesus adds at the end of this message and which is of extreme importance. Without it, our understanding of this passage would be incomplete. We will begin with our Lord's words in Verse 51. He says to his disciples:

"Have you understood all this?" They said to him, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." {Matt 13:51-52 RSV}

That is a very remarkable statement and in a moment we will examine it more fully. But Jesus prefaced his statement with this question: "Have you understood this?" We are almost startled and amazed at their answer. Very naively and ingenuously they simply reply, "Yes." Without any questions, without a word of explanation, without a single reservation on their part they say, "Yes, we have understood you." So Jesus then goes on to show them something very remarkable about themselves. And since we also are now his disciples, just as they were, what he says applies to us as well.

The Lord uses a very interesting phrase to describe his disciples at this point. He says, "Therefore I say to you, because you say you understand this, 'every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder ...'" He says his disciples are scribes. That is startling because the scribes were enemies of the Lord. If you read through the Gospel accounts, you find that there were three classes of people who opposed the Lord's ministry and were constantly throwing obstacles in his path. There were the chief priests, the Pharisees (members of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council), and there were the scribes. These three groups constantly tried to trap Jesus in his own words and thus to get him into trouble with the Roman authorities. It was particularly true of the scribes. They were the ones who came to him with questions designed to trap him. They were the ones who constantly tried to stir up the people against him. Yet when our Lord concluded this message he says to his disciples, "You are scribes who have been trained for the kingdom of heaven."

If you want to know who these scribes were you must begin back in the Old Testament books of Nehemiah and Ezra. Nehemiah was the first of the scribes. He was a leader among the remnant of the Jews who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon after the Captivity. The first arrivals had found the city of Jerusalem in ruins and the temple completely destroyed. The Jews were authorized to rebuild the temple and the city, and, especially, to restore the worship of God in the temple. In order to be able to do so, the spirit of the people first had to be built up. And to do that Ezra took the Law of Moses and began to teach the people out of the Law. Nehemiah records that a pulpit of wood was built for him. This is the first time a pulpit appears in the Bible. Standing upon it he began to speak to them from the Scriptures, and to interpret the Law of Moses and what it meant.

That was the beginning of the ministry of the scribes. At first it was a very helpful ministry. But, as always happens in the ministry of preaching or teaching, men soon came in who carried on the form of the ministry, but whose words were narrow and rigid and who offered interpretive opinions unsupported by the Scriptures. And so the scribes, who were the authoritative interpreters of the Law, became a group of legalistic, self-righteous teachers, as our Lord found them in his day.

But still he uses this very word, and says, "You disciples are scribes. You are to be authoritative in the Word of God. You are like men trained in the kingdom of heaven." In other words, the disciples of Christ, including, I hope, all of us, are men and women who are being taught how God works in the affairs of men. We are learning, gradually, the secrets of the divine activity behind the scenes of history, and behind the scenes of personal events in our own lives. That is what a scribe is for. He is to understand, he is to be trained, he is to be disciplined, in the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.

How desperately such scribes are needed today! I observe people getting into all manner of arguments because they do not understand what God is doing. I see Christians getting into shouting matches over Vietnam, arguing at the tops of their voices, with far more heat than light, about what is happening out there. God continues to allow the war in Vietnam to go on because it is working out his announced purposes. His purposes are largely being ignored by Christian and non-Christian alike and are quite different than the purposes opponents or the proponents of the Vietnamese war can see at this moment.

Now, it is the business of Christians to understand life. That is what Jesus is saying to his disciples. He is saying to people who are being trained for the kingdom of heaven, i.e., they are being trained to see what God is doing. The kingdom of heaven is God at work in the affairs of men, and they are being told how to perceive what God is doing and understand it. It is the business of Christians to learn how to live, and to handle life's problems. We are here to learn to live realistically and with increasing success, to learn how to cope with life's problems. In doing so we are to understand the process by which this takes place.

I like to stress this because I find so many people who think becoming a Christian is just a way to get to heaven when you die. Thank God, it does include that. That is kind of a fringe benefit you receive.

When the Lord speaks to his disciples after revealing to them the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, he asks them a question to ask them. It is a very important question because it marks the beginning of that process for them, "Do you understand what I've been saying?" Obviously this is the place to begin. How can we know what life is all about unless we understand something about it?

Every one of us has experienced the fact that life is filled with much confusion and delusion. Many cannot distinguish what is true from what is false. We are offered many things which we consider with promise. We hope they will do something for us. And the world around us is constantly urging them, telling us that we will be denying ourselves if we don't try them. So we try them, and discover that the promises are empty. They do not deliver. We have grasped cobwebs. Life is a continual process of trying things which seem to offer success and help, but of finding them to be absolutely phony promises that end up disenchanting and disillusioning with life.

What we need, obviously, is understanding. We need a way to find out about these things without trying each of them. We need a way to know the difference between the true and the false, the phony and the real, without investing most of our lives in the process. That is exactly what our Lord came to give us. The apostle John says, "We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding," {1 John 5:20 RSV}. That is the great theme of the good news of the gospel! It is a faithful revelation to us of the things that really are. The truth as it is in Jesus is the way that God has set life up. And it is going to be that way whether we accept it or reject it, whether we like it or do not like it. Those facts are going to stand unshakable. That is what Jesus meant when he said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my word shall never pass away." {Matt 24:35, Mark 13:31, Luke 21:33 KJV}. Why? Well, because his word is fact, it is utter reality.

You know how facts are. You can attack them, and ignore them, and skirt around them, and try to deny them. But when you get all through, there they are -- staring you right in the face. No matter how you try to deceive yourself about them you cannot get by with it forever. Ultimately you must turn around, and look down many and many a blind alley, and come back and look the facts squarely in the face and agree that that is the way things are. I can't change it." That is what Jesus has come to tell us. That is what the gospel is all about. It is the revelation of things the way they really are. To me the glory of being a Christian is that I do not have to go through all the agonizing pain of trying out everything that comes along. I can find the truth about it by the Word.

That is why Jesus says, "Do you understand these things?" That is where it begins. There must be a basic understanding that what God is saying is true, and that you know what he means. So when Jesus asks them this message this is what he asks them. And the disciples answer very naively, "Yes."

I don't think they were being dishonest. They were just like we are. They meant that they had an apprehension of the words that he used. They knew the meaning of the symbols he employed. So perhaps many of you are now saying after this series of messages on these parables, "Yes, we understand them. We know what you meant. We know that when you were talking about the pearl of great price you were referring to the church. When you were talking about the hidden treasure you meant the nation Israel. We know that the mustard seed represents the whole enterprise of Christendom in the world today, with its power and splendor and prestige among men. Yes, we understand these things."

But, obviously, as you watch these disciples they reveal that they do not understand what he meant. Their actions soon show that they have only a very limited and shallow understanding of what he was saying. Just as do we. It is true that we have to start with that mental comprehension -- but that is not enough. And so our Lord must go on to show them what else is necessary to bring them to a true understanding of what they have heard.

We can easily identify with them. Suppose somebody asked you, "Do you understand beauty?" How would you answer? You would be to say, "Yes." Who understands beauty, or love, or death, or life? These are but words. We may understand the definitions of the words but who really understands the subjects? None of us.

These disciples remind me of the boy who was not paying much attention in his physics class. His teacher noticed this and so he suddenly asked him a question: "Jack, will you tell me what electricity is?" T

caught unaware, did not even hear the question. But he tried to seem sharp and he said, "Well, s had the answer on the tip of my tongue just a moment ago, but it has escaped me right now." An professor said, "What a pity. What a pity! The only man in the history of the world who has ever electricity is -- and he's forgotten it already!" That is the position the disciples are in.

But Jesus goes on to show them that a deeper process is necessary. He says that it consists of Everyone who is being trained in the kingdom of heaven, man or woman, boy or girl, whoever is le recognize how God works in human life, is going to have to go through this process. He will be lik householder, a home owner, who takes out of his treasury things new and old. That sounds very description of a garage sale but that is not what our Lord has in mind. The householder is the hea house. He is an authoritative figure. Jesus is the only one in the Scriptures who ever uses this te householder. In Greek the word ~~oikos~~ ~~despotes~~ ~~house-despot~~, house director. He says that every disci who is learning the process of life is like a man who is the head of a home and who is constantly his resources two kinds of things -- things new and things old -- and putting them together.

What are these new and old things? Well, since Jesus is talking about life, as he always does, you immediately what they are. The things that are new are the constantly-changing experiences of ou one of us is always coming each day into new and fresh experiences that we have never had befo running into things new all the time. Right now I am experiencing certain things that I have never before -- largely because I have never been 53 years old in 1971 before. But I am now. I am runni experiences as a father which I have never had before, because I have never before been a father children the current ages of my children. So it is different now, it is new.

And you are running into new experiences. Some of you are starting out right now with the exper marriage. You have never had that relationship before; it is brand new. Some of you are beginning You have never done this before and it is all fresh and new to you, no matter how many millions h through it before you. Some of you are recent graduates of school and you are starting out in a r relationship with the world which you have never had before. Some of you are still children and ev brings you into a new experience you have never before entered. So life is made up of things new

Ah, yes, but there are also things old. The old things are the abiding things, the eternal, unalterabl the unchanging relationships which never have varied for all of human time but remain the same fr are things like that. The nature of God is one. Human nature never changes either. Basic family re fathers with children, brothers with sisters, never change. There are issues that never change. Ev remain the same. Laws of morality and physics never change, abide forever.

If you will pardon it, an illustration I have used before may be helpful at this point. I remember the man who went to see an old music teacher who was a friend of his. When he knocked on the doo friend greeted him. And the man, in the flippant way we moderns often do, said, "Well good morni the good news for today?" The old music teacher didn't say a word. He just went back into the ro up a little rubber hammer, and struck a tuning fork that was hanging there. As the note sounded room he said, "That's Now, that waS five thousand years ago and thatA will be five thousand years in the future. The soprano across the hall sings off-key. The piano downstairs TD - olhjtaiF4

great place where the revelation of things old is found is in the Word of God. There is where you real and what you can count on, what will not disappear or fold under you when you put your weight on it. The business of life is to understand these things. Jesus is saying that you can start with an interest in them, but you will never understand them until you put the two together -- things new and things old. Then you will understand life. Then you will be trained for the kingdom of heaven.

You know how this can happen. Perhaps the order may vary. Sometimes it is the new which illustrates and explains the old. All of us have gone through some kind of experience and, right in the middle of it, we have emerged from it, suddenly we realize that a passage of Scripture is illuminated by this experience. The first time we understand what the old has said. It has come alive to us. And we never forget it. We may have read that passage repeatedly for years but it never seemed to say anything much to us. Then, through experience, the thing new, had explained the thing old.

This past week or so our family has been discussing certain family needs including the needs of children to be loved and accepted and given a sense of self-appreciation, a sense of their own value. These must be met by parents toward their children. Children are designed to learn from their parents the need for respect, love and the need for evaluating their lives and seeing themselves as persons of worth who have a purpose in God's program. It is the parents' task to make this known to their children, to help them to see themselves as appreciated and loved. And all this is designed then to lead the children on to God, so that children can come to know and trust God as an unseen Father because they have come to know and trust their parents. They see.

As we were discussing this someone asked, "Well, what if this doesn't happen? What if fathers and mothers don't show this kind of love? Or what if an accident occurs and they are gone, and the child is left an orphan, and no one is there to show them this; then what? Can they learn it directly from God?" Immediately there came flashing into my mind a verse from the twenty-seventh Psalm: "When my father and mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up," {Psa 27:10 KJV}. I understood something a

apart from that physical relationship which, outside of marriage, is destructive. A couple of weeks came back and said, "Oh, things are so different now! We're back together again, and our relationship is growing. God is leading us on." They were so grateful for the understanding of the old which had become new.

So many times I have heard someone say, "I don't know what's wrong with my marriage." But then I have seen the husband learn from the Scriptures that a husband's role is to give himself to his wife, to be with her, to talk to her, to open up his life and let her in, to let her see what his needs and responsibilities are, and to share with her. And as he does this, the marriage begins to heal. That is a fundamental, unchanging principle of the relationship of marriage.

Or I have seen the wife begin to understand from the Scriptures that her role is to stop trying to

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