

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 thirteenth 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 predict great movements and events which history now records as having taken place. The very things which Jesus said 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 added at the end of this message and which is of extreme importance. Without it, our understanding of this great 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 prefaces the statement with this question: "Have you understood this?" We are almost startled and amazed at the disciples' 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 our Lord then goes on to show them something very remarkable about themselves. And since we also are related to him as 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.e., 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 Jesus! If you read through the Gospel accounts, you find that there were three classes of people who opposed our Lord's ministry and were constantly throwing obstacles in his path. There were the chief priests, and the rulers (members of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council), and there were the scribes. These three groups continually tried to trap Jesus in his own words and thus to get him into trouble with the Roman authorities. This was particularly true of the scribes. They were the ones who came to him with questions designed to trick him. They were the ones who constantly tried to stir up the people against him. Yet when our Lord comes to the close of 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 Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra 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 utter ruins, 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. Chapter 8 of Nehemiah records that a pulpit of wood was built for him. This is the first time a pulpit appears in Scripture. Standing upon it he began to speak to them from the Scriptures, and to interpret the Law of Moses, explaining what it meant.

That was the beginning of the ministry of the scribes. At first it was a very helpful ministry. But, as almost

always happens in the ministry of preaching or teaching, men soon came in who carried on the form of this 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 interpreters of the Word of God. You are like men trained in the kingdom of heaven." In other words, the disciples of Jesus 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 personal events in our own lives. That is what a scribe is for. He is to understand, he is to be trained, 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. Yet God continues to allow the war in Vietnam to go on because it is working out his announced purposes. These purposes are largely being ignored by Christian and non-Christian alike and are quite different than either the 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. These are 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 he is doing and understand it. It is the business of Christians to learn how to live, and to handle life rightly. We are here to learn to live realistically and with increasing success, to learn how to cope with life and handle its 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 as a Christian, and there is a great future ahead for believers. But that is not why God has called you now to be a Christian. Or, if it is, that is not why he has left you here, anyhow. He has left you to learn how to live, to learn how to be healed, to have the same struggles and the same problems as men and women who are not Christians but to learn how to solve them. When non-Christians look at our lives, they ought to be able to see the healing taking place. They ought to be able to see the problems increasingly being solved. That is what gives them the confidence to believe that the message we preach is a genuine message, a message of reality and truth.

If, on the other hand, as has been happening so much in the last decade, non-Christians looking at Christians see nothing but the same miserable set of problems that they themselves are struggling with, if they see Christian homes torn with strife and bickering and quarreling and fighting, see marriages split right down the middle and see Christians getting divorces, if they see sexual immorality prevailing in Christian lives as much as in non-Christian, if they see all the evils and all the struggles and all the heartaches and the longings and loneliness prevailing in our lives as much as in everyone else's, then they say to us, "What is your message for? What does it do? Why should we be interested? You're not doing any better than we are."

That is why the Scriptures always stress the fact that understanding Christianity consists of far more than merely believing a set of doctrines or creeds; it is demonstrating a life. Anything short of that is an abortive and distorted picture of Christian life. That is why the world therefore is constantly watching. What Jesus is teaching his disciples here at the close of this great message is that this transformation of life is not a single act of magic. It is not accomplished at the conversion of an individual. It begins there, but that is only the beginning. It is not accomplished, for example, by the fact that you go forward at a Billy Graham Crusade and receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. That is the way to begin, and your life will show an immediate change for the better in some ways, yes. There will indeed be an impartation of peace and forgiveness that you have never known before, and it is proper for us to rejoice in this and to give thanks. But that is not the end; that is just the beginning!

This is what so few Christians seem to understand. When you become a Christian you are introduced into a

continually transforming process which ought to exhibit increasingly the healing and the wholeness of life. We are all in that process. Nobody ever arrives at the end of it in this life. But it ought to be evident that visible and continual progress is being made.

When the Lord speaks to his disciples after revealing to them the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, he has a question to ask them. It is a very important question because it marks the beginning of that process. He asks them, "Do you understand what I've been saying?" Obviously this is the place to begin. How can we hope to 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 times we cannot distinguish what is true from what is false. We are offered many things which we consider to be filled with promise. We hope they will do something for us. And the world around us is constantly urging us to try 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. And so we end up disenchanted and disillusioned with life.

What we need, obviously, is understanding. We need a way to find out about these things without having to try 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. In his first letter John says, "We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding," {1 Jn 5:20 RSV}. That is the great theme of the good news of the gospel! It is a faithful revelation to us of the way things 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 forget them. But when you get all through, there they are -- staring you right in the face. No matter how you have tried to deceive yourself about them you cannot get by with it forever. Ultimately you must turn around, after going down many and many a blind alley, and come back and look the facts squarely in the face and agree, "Yes, that is the way things are. I can't change it." That is what Jesus has come to tell us. That is what the Word of God 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 out about it by the Word.

That is why Jesus says, "Do you understand these things?" That is where it begins. There must be a clear understanding that what God is saying is true, and that you know what he means. So when Jesus finishes his 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 intellectual apprehension of the words that he used. They knew the meaning of the symbols he employed. So they said, as 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, growing into 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 talking about, just as do we. It is true that we have to start with that mental comprehension -- but that is not all there is to it. 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 foolish 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 professor noticed this and so he suddenly asked him a question: "Jack, will you tell me what electricity is?" The boy, caught unaware, did not even hear the question. But he tried to seem sharp and he said, "Well, sir, I'm sorry. I had the answer on the tip of my tongue just a moment ago, but it has escaped me right now." And the professor said, "What a pity. What a pity! The only man in the history of the world who has ever known what 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 two elements. Everyone who is being trained in the kingdom of heaven, man or woman, boy or girl, whoever is learning to recognize how God works in human life, is going to have to go through this process. He will be like a householder, a home owner, who takes out of his treasury things new and old. That sounds very much like the description of a garage sale but that is not what our Lord has in mind. The householder is the head of the house. He is an authoritative figure. Jesus is the only one in the Scriptures who ever uses this term for a householder. In Greek the word is *oikodespotes* -- house-despot, house director. He says that every disciple who is learning the process of life is like a man who is the head of a home and who is constantly taking out of 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 can see immediately what they are. The things that are new are the constantly-changing experiences of our lives. Every one of us is always coming each day into new and fresh experiences that we have never had before. We are running into things new all the time. Right now I am experiencing certain things that I have never experienced before -- largely because I have never been 53 years old in 1971 before. But I am now. I am running into experiences as a father which I have never had before, because I have never before been a father this old with 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 experience of marriage. You have never had that relationship before; it is brand new. Some of you are beginning parenthood. You have never done this before and it is all fresh and new to you, no matter how many millions have gone through it before you. Some of you are recent graduates of school and you are starting out in a new relationship with the world which you have never had before. Some of you are still children and every day 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, unalterable principles, the unchanging relationships which never have varied for all of human time but remain the same forever. There are things like that. The nature of God is one. Human nature never changes either. Basic family relationships, fathers with children, brothers with sisters, never change. There are issues that never change. Evil and good 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 story of a man who went to see an old music teacher who was a friend of his. When he knocked on the door his old friend greeted him. And the man, in the flippant way we moderns often do, said, "Well good morning! What's the good news for today?" The old music teacher didn't say a word. He just went back into the room, picked up a little rubber hammer, and struck a tuning fork that was hanging there. As the note sounded throughout the room he said, "That is 'A'. Now, that was 'A' five thousand years ago and that will be 'A' five thousand years in the future. The soprano across the hall sings off-key. The piano downstairs is out of tune. The baritone upstairs flats his high notes. But," he said, striking the tuning fork again, "that is 'A', and that, my friend, is the good news for today!"

And that is true, isn't it? There are fundamental things which have never changed. One of the satanic lies that is being foisted upon our searching, deeply-feeling generation is that there is nothing which never changes, that everything is different. That is a lie! There are great things which never have changed and never will change. As long as the universe is here, and even beyond that time, as long as God exists, there are things that never will change -- things old. And the business of life, the process which will make you an authoritative interpreter of life, so that people will listen to your words and heed what you say, is constantly to discover how to take

the things old and the things new -- the changing experiences of your life and the unchanging, eternal truth of God -- and bring them together.

Life itself will teach you some of the old things. You do not need a Bible to discover some of them. But the great place where the revelation of things old is found is in the Word of God. There is where you learn what is real and what you can count on, what will not disappear or fold under you when you put your weight upon it. The business of life is to understand these things. Jesus is saying that you can start with an intellectual grasp of 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, or after we have emerged from it, suddenly we realize that a passage of Scripture is illuminated by this experience and for the first time we understand what the old has said. It has come alive to us. And we never forget that lesson. We may have read that passage repeatedly for years but it never seemed to say anything much to us until our 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 supplied by parents toward their children. Children are designed to learn from their parents the need for responding to love and the need for evaluating their lives and seeing themselves as persons of worth who have a place 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 therefore come to know and trust God as an unseen Father because they have come to know and trust the father 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 homeless, an orphan, and no one is there to show them this; then what? Can they learn it directly from God?" And immediately there came flashing into my mind a verse from the twenty-seventh Psalm: "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up," {Psa 27:10 KJV}. I understood something about that which I have never understood before. It is that God does not intend to teach children about himself directly when they have fathers and mothers who can teach them about him. His business is to work out this relationship with the fathers and mothers so that the children can learn through them. It is unlikely that a child will really learn how to trust and love God as long as his parents are there and could teach him this but are not doing so. This passage came clear from that, and along with it all the great promises of his concern which God gives throughout the Old Testament. He promises to be a father to the fatherless, a husband to the widow, and to meet such needs where there is no human person to do so.

But then you know that more often it is the old which unveils and unravels the new. You encounter an experience and you find that you don't know what to do with it. It is causing you obvious difficulty and trouble. You are under pressure, being torn, and things are going wrong. So you say, "What's wrong?" -- as many are saying today. What should you do? That is the time to turn to the old, to let the old explain the new, to apply to life the great principles and teachings of the Scriptures and let that problem begin to be solved as the old begins to unravel the new.

As a pastor I have seen this work so frequently. A young man came to me a few weeks ago and said, "Something has gone wrong in my relationship with my girlfriend. We had a wonderful relationship at first. We got to know one another and spent a lot of time together and enjoyed it so. But now something has gone sour and I don't know what it is. Can you help me?" I began to talk with him and eventually discovered that he and his girlfriend, in a relative degree of innocence, had gone on into sexual relations together. They thought that this would fulfill them all the more because the world was telling them that this was the way to find the glory they were seeking. But, instead, as it always does before marriage, it had aborted their relationship, it had cut it off. They had leveled out at a plateau which they could not get beyond, and they were feeling this, but didn't know why. This is what God is trying to prevent by what he says about sex before marriage.

So I showed this young man what God says. He began to see it, and he brought his girlfriend in so that we could all talk together. As we went through the Scriptures, and saw the loving instruction of a heavenly Father who explains what sex is, and how it works, they began to see what had been happening. So they went back and straightened it out. They stopped their sexual practices. They returned to seeking to know one another apart from that physical relationship which, outside of marriage, is destructive. A couple of weeks ago they 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 saved the 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 communicate with her, to talk to her, to open up his life and let her in, to let her see what his needs and responses are, 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 manipulate and maneuver behind the scenes, to stop forcing her husband to do things by means of those subtle, quiet little ways that wives have which husbands call nagging. She is to stop this and begin to trust her husband -- not in everything, that cannot be done at first -- but in some things, in little ways begin to trust her husband's leadership, and to put the responsibility back on him and follow him. And suddenly she discovers that the marriage begins to heal. Why? Because the old has solved the problem of the new.

This happens in quarrels. Jesus' fundamental law for handling quarrels between human beings is to begin with yourself. "First, first, remove the beam that is in your own eye, then you will see clearly how to help your brother," {cf, Matt 7:5}. Yet we always try to turn it around, don't we? We want them to change. "If they'll do this, then I'll do that." But it will never work on that basis, never. For all eternity, if you try it on that basis, it will never work. But let the old reveal the new, and things begin to work out.

Fears: How many people are afraid today! The answer to fear is faith. But it begins small, in little ventures, not in big, sudden leaps into an unknown future but in little testings of the reality of God, trying him out and seeing that he can be depended upon, and then moving on further. Gradually, fear begins to fade as faith takes over, and love is born, for "perfect love casts out fear," {1 Jn 4:18}.

That is what Christianity is all about. It is a life-healing process. It is designed to change us and make us whole. Apart from visible evidence of that wholeness we have nothing to say to the world around. They must see this healing taking place in our midst. Jesus says that you can never speak with authority, you can never be a scribe, interpreting the Law, merely by having a "head" understanding of the doctrine of Scripture. Authority will come only as you have undergone the process of taking things old and things new and putting them together. Out of that experience you can say,

"Let me share with you a lesson God has taught me. I got the clue from the Word, and I began to apply it to my situation, and this is what happened. God has healed, and I want to share this with you."

That is the kind of Christianity to which the world listens and responds.

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we ask you to teach us from your Word in such a way that we gain not only a mental understanding of the doctrine but the actual manifestation of it in practice in our lives. Heal us, Lord, by your marvelous, powerful Word which shall always accomplish that purpose for which you have sent it. Help us to take these great things that are of old and put them together rightly with the things that are new, and thus learn how to be true scribes in the kingdom of heaven. We ask in your name, Amen.

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