

## A Cultural Look at some Parables of Jesus

One of the difficulties of truly understanding the messages of Jesus and his teachings is our Western mindset and patterns of thinking. We interpret things according to how we see and experience the world, forgetting that Jesus was not a W.A.S.P from the West, but an Easterner! (And I don't mean Eastern Canada – whose people have their own way of thinking about things as well!)

**Kenneth E. Bailey** is Chairman of the Biblical Department at the Near Eastern School of Theology in Beirut. In his two books, *Poet and Peasant* and *Through Peasant Eyes*, he has taken his over 30 years of experience living in the Middle East and studied the parables of Jesus with an in-depth understanding of the culture in which Jesus lived and the people his stories addressed. The insights are amazing and profound. When one begins to understand a few attitudes about subjects such as hospitality in the Middle East, more often than not, one finds themselves saying “Aha! Now that makes sense!” Hospitality is an extremely important value and there are certain rules and practices that are accepted and automatic. What Westerners might see as rude and presumptuous, an Easterner would see as necessary duty and manners. Jesus' stories then take on a different meaning or emphasis that may have been previously missed.

I do not begin to scratch the surface of the scholarly work that Bailey has accomplished to provide the background and understanding for the parables that we will study in the following ten weeks. I have certainly not begun to touch on the work that he does with literary analysis of the Biblical texts in light of contemporary Eastern writings of the day. Rather, I have gleaned some of what caught my attention and I could wrap my mind around to share with you. If you would like to grasp a much greater understanding of what is presented here, I strongly recommend that you read his books.

*Women in Focus* offers these Bible studies to you free of charge in order to strengthen the ministries within your church. They are not specifically written for women and can be used in any context within your church ministries. We hope you find them of value and that they generate positive discussion and a deeper longing to know the Scripture. If you have any concerns about the material or questions, do not hesitate to contact me for clarification and discussion. Any feedback received is helpful and valued.

By grace alone,

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## LESSON 1: The Two Debtors - Luke 7: 36 – 50

We find this particular parable in the context of a story or a dialogue that takes place at the house of Simon, the Pharisee. It is a parable that is told in connection to the events taking place around it. Jesus has capitalized on a teachable moment, whether the student was all that teachable or not, is another matter!

### Cultural Context:

*It was fairly common for a traveling rabbi to speak at a gathering and then to be invited to a home to continue the discussions. Simon has followed a tradition of opening his home to the community of scholars to come and meet the teacher over a meal. These banquets were open to the public to come and listen to the continued debate, though not invited to join the banquet. They would stand around the walls and listen in. Jesus was an invited guest and reclined at the table.*

1. Read the passage all the way through.
  - a. There are three primary characters involved in this incident. Share one way that you feel you might identify with each character in the story.
  - b. Name one character trait that you see in each person as revealed in this specific situation. Simon is \_\_\_\_\_, Jesus is \_\_\_\_\_, and the woman is \_\_\_\_\_.

*Each guest would be greeted with a kiss upon entering. If the guest was deemed an equal, he would be kissed on the cheek. If he was deemed of greater status, such as a Rabbi, he would be kissed on the hand. Guests would then gather around a low table, stretched out long and narrow with several bowls of food placed on it. Each guest would recline with their face toward the table, leaning on their left elbow; their feet would be out behind them, far from the table. The servants would then come around and wash the feet of the guests from behind.*

1. If Jesus were truly recognized as a Rabbi, how would he have been treated in Simon's home?
2. How did Simon treat Jesus? Why did he do this?

*Most rabbis would have left Simon's house after being treated so rudely. Simon was directly challenging the authority of Jesus publicly. Simon expected that Jesus would walk out.*

3. Jesus stayed in spite of Simon's plans. Why did he stay and take the insult? What did Jesus say to Simon by this action and how do you think it upset Simon's plans?

*This "woman of the city", by which was meant that she plied her trade on the streets of the city, came to Jesus with a perfume jar to anoint Jesus. Prostitutes*

*often wore a small vial of perfume on a string around their neck to sweeten the smell of their trade. The act of pouring out this perfume was very symbolic in that she was giving up her former life and pouring it all away. She was not a poor prostitute, as she had a very high quality of perfume and brought it all to Jesus.*

1. Why did the woman come to this particular gathering?
2. What did she come prepared to do? What was she not prepared for, but responded to the oversight of Simon?
3. What prompted her actions?
4. Why did she let down her hair and can you guess what the significance of that act in her culture was?
5. How does Jesus respond to her action?
6. How does Simon respond to her action?

*Jesus recognizes that the woman has already been forgiven and that she has come to show her deep, deep gratitude. Simon will not recognize her as repentant, in spite of her actions, and continues to brand her a sinner.*

1. Now Jesus tells a parable. Though it doesn't translate well, in verse 40, Jesus speaks in a challenging way to Simon. Why does he tell this parable here and what message is he communicating to Simon?
2. Does Simon get the message? How does he respond? Look carefully at every word he uses. Does he get it? Does he reveal any repentance?

*Jesus now does something that is very culturally unacceptable – he criticizes his host. Never, no matter how poorly a host treated you would you ever, ever criticize their hospitality, but Jesus does. Normally, because Simon was so obviously rude to Jesus, he expected that Jesus would not stay, but leave the gathering, rather than remain in the humiliation, but Jesus stays. This throws off Simon's plan right from the beginning. And then this woman comes and shows him up, offering the hospitality that Simon had denied Jesus, and so he is further disturbed by these unexpected events. And then, Jesus has the gall to confront him with his behavior in front of all of his other guests.*

1. How do the other guests respond to Jesus' behavior? How do they interpret the actions of Jesus?
2. What was the primary message that Jesus wanted to teach Simon and the other Pharisees gathered?
3. What message do you receive from this story? Have you been as judgmental and misjudging as was Simon? Have you ever felt overwhelming gratitude for your salvation as did the woman? Which way do you tend to lean – toward an attitude of constant gratitude for the grace in your life, or do you tend toward a critical, judging spirit?
4. Where would Jesus have you 'turn around' in your life?

## Lesson 2: The Fox, The Funeral and the Furrow – Luke 9: 57-62

This text is a series of three dialogues of people encountering Jesus. There is a pattern in each of the conversations. I've laid out the first pattern for you. Can you find the same pattern in the other two dialogues?

And as they were going along the road  
a man said to him

"I will *follow* you  
wherever you *go*."

And Jesus said to him,  
"Foxes have holes,  
and birds of the air have roosts.

But the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head

FOLLOW  
GO  
COST TOO HIGH  
PARABLE

*The first and the third stories are about two who volunteer to follow Jesus, and Jesus asks them if they can really pay the cost of what it means to be a follower. The middle story is about a recruit. He is asked to follow, and it is the recruit who counts the cost which Jesus affirms, but also affirms the call.*

1. Is there anything that bothers you about Jesus' response to these people and their concerns?
2. What does it say to you about being a disciple of Jesus?
3. The first volunteer is willing to follow unconditionally but has not counted the cost? Can you identify with this in any way?
4. The second recruit is told to follow, and he has reasons why this is not a good time. Can you identify with this in any way?
5. The third is another volunteer, but he has placed conditions on his calling. Can you relate to that person in any way?

### **Cultural Background for First Dialogue:**

*The Middle East is charged with religious and political tension and it has been for thousands of years. In this parable, Jesus is using political symbolism. There were many people living in the land of Israel that had similar blood lines, like Palestinians and Jews today, but they do not get along. Samaritans are another example. These were often referred to as "foxes" in Jewish writings. Herod was of mixed blood, and he was often referred to as the fox. Also, the Romans that were occupying their land were referred to as the "birds that feather their own nests".*

*Jesus is saying to this eager follower that the road may not be what he thinks. Jesus will not use the methods of the Romans or other nations to conquer oppression. In fact, Jesus will be despised and rejected by the world. His road leads to Gethsemane. Are you really willing to go that way?*

1. Why are you a follower of Jesus today?
2. The volunteer does not answer Jesus' question? Could you answer after you have been told that you will be following a rejected Son of man, and the way of suffering?
3. Why is it easy to be a Christian today? Shouldn't it be harder to be a true follower of Jesus? What has it cost you to be a Christian?

### ***Cultural Background to Second Dialogue:***

“Let me go and bury my father” means: let me go and serve my father while he is alive and after he dies, I will bury him and come”. If the father had really died, the man would be keeping vigil over the body, not talking to Jesus, so the man is saying that sometime in the distant future he would be willing to serve, but not now. It was a social obligation to care for the father and the family business until the death of the father.

1. Though Jesus’ answer sounds harsh and uncaring, he is actually challenging the man to go now, not in some future time when it is more convenient. Are there ways that you want to say to God’s calling – “Not now. It will be easier when . . . ?”
2. Jesus is also challenging the man to go against the strong cultural demand to stay with the family until the father’s passing. Is this a fair demand of Jesus to ask such a high price? Can you relate this to any situations today?
3. We must not always think that Jesus’ call is always a call to the mission field – to leave this land for another. There is much work for a Christian to do in this place. And there is a cost to obedience. Think on the following: What would Jesus want his disciples to do about:
  - a. Environmental issues – what does it cost us to truly be healing our environment?
  - b. Fair trade value – what would it cost us to purchase items that the workers received a fair days wage for?
  - c. Poor and homeless – what would it cost you to support another family that lives in poverty? Would Jesus ever ask that of you?
  - d. Think of other issues that challenge the Christian today.

### ***Cultural Background to the Third Dialogue:***

The better translation of “say good-bye” is “to take leave of”. The distinction between the two translations is important in Middle Eastern culture. The person who is leaving must request permission to leave from those who are staying. Everyone listening to the dialogue knows that naturally his father will refuse to let the boy wander off on some questionable enterprise. Thus the volunteer’s excuse is ready-made. Shedding crocodile tears he can loudly insist that he wants to go but his father will not permit him. So he’s off the hook.

1. What do you do when the demands of following Jesus come in conflict with the obligations to family?
2. To keep the plow running straight the farmer must look forward and not back. How might we be tempted to look backwards in our Christian walk, rather than forward? For example, the church often looks back to the 1950s and the 1960s as the glory years of the church in North America. Were they really the best years? What is God calling the church forward to, not back to?
3. These sayings are very hard. Does Jesus really demand everything of us? How many of us then can truly say that we are followers of Jesus? Are there costs that you have not been willing to pay?

### **Lesson 3: What Must I Do? – Luke 10:25 – 37**

There have been so many studies and sermons and lessons on this familiar parable of The Good Samaritan and so we will not rehash all of the usual details. Instead, we will focus on the dialogue between the lawyer and Jesus into which the parable is inserted. The questions that the lawyer asks reveal the religious thinking of the day and so we will endeavor to unpack these questions.

#### ***Cultural Background of First Dialogue:***

*The Jewish leaders understood that the land was an inheritance - a gift from God – and that they could do nothing to earn it, but simply receive it. However, they also believed that their eternal future (salvation) was tied to keeping perfectly the law of Moses. This is the classic tension we face to day of “grace” vs “works”. Think about the question, “What must I **do** to **inherit** eternal life?”*

1. What can you DO to gain an inheritance? What can you do to get into Uncle Henry’s will? What is wrong with the Lawyer’s question?
2. Jesus asks the lawyer, “What does the law say?” Why does Jesus bring up the law for the lawyer?
3. What is the answer of the lawyer? Notice how he put two texts together in his answer that was not commonly done previously to Christ. “To love the Lord . . .” comes from Deuteronomy and “To love your neighbor . . .” comes from Leviticus. What does this tell us about the lawyer’s theology?

*Jesus gives the lawyer a wonderful response that we miss in the translation of the words. In Greek, the answer reads, “Do this and you will come alive!” In an old Syrian version of the text, it reads, “Do this and you are living!”*

1. Jesus changes the lawyer’s question from worrying about “eternal life” as life in the here after, to defining abundant life. How is Jesus defining life?
2. When we think of the question of works verses grace, how does Jesus solve this struggle with his answer here? What are good works for?
3. By Jesus’ response, what should we all be concerned about and what should we **not** be concerned about?

#### ***Cultural Background to Dialogue 2:***

*The lawyer now wants to know the boundaries of loving his neighbor. In Leviticus, neighbor is defined as being one’s brother and “the sons of your own people”. Rabbis understood this to be all Jews. They were divided over whether the proselyte (convert) was to be considered a brother but they were sure it did not include gentiles. A rabbinical saying reads “that heretics, informers and renegades should be pushed into the ditch and not pulled out”. So the lawyer wants Jesus to declare where he stands on this issue. Jesus tells a story in response.*

*Notice the important place that the law plays in this story. The priest was the highest rank and very affected by the laws of purity and defilement. He would have ridden a horse and*

*appears to be returning from his duties in Jerusalem. The duties of a priest would have included the tools of oil and wine. The Levite was also affected by laws of purity, but the rules were less rigid. As the road was quite visible for a long distance, he would see the Priest riding ahead of him and perhaps this affected his own decision of how to respond. A Samaritan also follows the laws of the Torah but perhaps not as bound by the Jewish interpretations and explanations of the law.*

1. What resources do you think the Priest and Levite had that he could have offered to help? How did the law prevent him from acting? Whose lives were they concerned about?
2. What conflict might you face when compassion seems to conflict your moral values or personal safety? For example, in this day of risk for AIDS, would you help someone bleeding on the streets? How would you show compassion to a young girl wanting an abortion?
3. How might today's issues of liability and due diligence affect our ability to be compassionate or even honest?

*The Samaritan was not just "good" – the Samaritan was sacrificial, he was courageous, he was selfless, he was compassionate. Study his actions carefully:*

1. The man who was robbed was left naked and unconscious. This means that there was no way to identify his nationality – he couldn't speak so no accent and no clothing identification. What risk did the Samaritan take in approaching that the Priest and Levite were unwilling to take? Whose life was he concerned about?
2. The Samaritan "poured" out oil and wine. What might be the symbolism of this action beyond medicinal? Who was the priest here?
3. Consider this comment:

*"The Samaritan, by allowing himself to be identified (at the inn) runs a grave risk of having the family of the wounded man seek HIM out to take vengeance upon him (law of retaliation) . . . A cultural equivalent would be a Plains Indian in 1875 walking into Dodge City with a scalped cowboy on his horse, checking into a room over the local saloon, and staying the night to take care of him. Any Indian so brave would be fortunate to get out of the city alive even if he had saved the cowboy's life.*

Think of today's retaliation practices in the Middle East. If a Jew kills a Palestinian, who will pay for the crime? What is the huge risk the Samaritan took in staying with the wounded man if the family sought retaliation?

*In the first dialogue, the Lawyer asked the wrong question, but the law gave him the right answer. In the second dialogue, the Lawyer asked the right question, but the law gave him the wrong answer.*

1. Jesus challenges the lawyer that it is this life that should take our attention, not what happens after death. Joy comes from living compassionately. What fears keep us from compassion? How must we overcome those fears? Whose lives are you honestly most concerned about?
2. Where should our joy for life come from, according to Jesus? Do you truly believe that? Is it true for you?

## Lesson 4: Rights or Relationship? Luke 12: 13- 21

Once again, we are looking at a parable that is imbedded within a dialogue and the dialogue is as important as the story told by Jesus. Where the other dialogues involved Jewish leaders who were challenging Jesus, this person is more likely a follower of Jesus and truly wants Jesus to intervene in a family situation.

### Cultural Background

*Rabbis were often called upon to act in a judiciary matter as they were deemed as experts in the law. The law in question here is the practice of dividing up the inheritance after the passing of the father. The first born son was most often given double the portion of the rest of the sons. A brother could protest this and take it to a Rabbi to ask for the land to be divided equally for certain reasons. Jesus is obviously viewed here as a Rabbi.*

1. On the surface, what is reasonable about the man's request?
2. If "justice" is served, what might the man gain, but what might he also lose?"
3. Demanding that our personal rights to be met can cause loss of relationship. Name some examples of situations where this might happen.

*Verse 14: Jesus responds to the man's request quite harshly. In Arabic, it is almost an insulting response to say "O Man!" Ja Ragul. Jesus then uses an interesting word: The Greek word for "arbiter" is meristes. This is the only instance in the New Testament where it is used. The word for reconciler is mesites. This is a play on words regarding how Jesus views his ministry.*

1. Did Jesus see himself as a divider or a reconciler? In what way?

Now Jesus tells the man this wise saying, *"Take heed, and beware of any kind of insatiable desire, for the life of a person does not consist in the surpluses of his possessions."* Consider this quote: *It is true that a certain minimum of material goods is necessary for life; but it is not true that greater abundance of goods means greater abundance of life."*

1. Discuss this quote. Does the world truly believe that "money does not buy happiness?"
2. Do you think that the man who came to Jesus was in need and would have been in poor shape without the inheritance? Does that make any difference to how Jesus might have answered him? Was his a question of need or of greed?

Now look at the parable that Jesus tells the man to expound on the wise saying.

1. Verse 16: Who is responsible for the man's wealth? Where is credit given? Which attitude comes forth in his words, pride or gratitude?
2. Why should people work? Look up I Thess. 2: 7 – 12 and Eph. 4: 28 and discover two principles for earning money. Does the rich man reflect these values?



Consider this quote from Bailey: *One of the striking features of the traditional Middle Easterner is his gregarious nature. Life is lived in tightly knit communities. The leading men of the village still “sit at the gate” and spend literally years talking to one another. The slightest transaction is worthy of hours of discussion . . . The elder in such a community makes up his mind “in community”. He decides what he will do after hours of discussion with his friends.*

3. Verse 17: Who is the man talking to? Where is his community? In Western society it is not unusual to make these kinds of decisions in isolation. Would a billionaire in North America ever discuss with a wider community what he might do with his excess? For this man, it was highly unusual to make these decisions away from community, so what do we know about him from this information?
4. Why does the man have no place to store his crops?
5. Count the number of times the man says “I” or “My”. What does this reveal about the man? Is wealth the problem or something else?

Verse 18: *The language of, “tear down” and “build up” is classical prophetic language that refers to the call and ministry of the prophet (Jer. 1:10) It speaks of courageous acts in the name of God that call for suffering in their fulfillment. Here this noble language is sadly cheapened by this self-indulgent rich man who is determined that he alone will consume God’s gifts. (Kenneth Bailey)*

Verse 19: *Another Greek word play is used in the next two verses. When “eu” is added to a word, it is like saying “very” in English – it increases the intensity. “euphoreo” means, “to bring forth many things”, “euphraino” is “to enjoy all aspects of the good life. What is the common English word from these Greek words and its meaning?”*

*There are four words for “fool” in Greek and Luke chooses the strongest reference. When “a” is added to a word, it means “without” and so “aphron” (notice the root Phoreo which means to bear fruit) really means “without fruit, without mind or spirit or the goodness of life”.*

1. Euphoria – a life of fruitful abundance and joy does not come from wealth, as the man thinks. Instead, he is aphronic – lifeless and alone. How can excessive wealth be used to give life? How can it destroy life?
2. Why did Jesus tell this story to the man who seemed to be only asking for justice? What was the man willing to risk for his inheritance? How might he have ended up the same way as the man in the story?

*Jesus concludes with another wisdom saying, “This is how it will be for anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.*

1. In what ways are we stingy toward God?
2. Where has your work and career cost you relationship? Have possessions ever come before people in your own life? What do you do to counter that tendency that we all struggle with?
3. What does God desire for us in order that we might have “Euphoreo” in our day to day lives?
4. What lessons are in these words for you? For the Christian church?

## Lesson 5: Pilate, The Tower and The Fig Tree – Luke 13: 1 – 9

Once again Jesus is being baited by the crowd, not by a question this time, but a report of violence. It appears innocent, but it is actually another trap. If Jesus responds against the Romans, they can report him as an insurgent. However, if Jesus doesn't react, the Jewish people will turn away from him as siding with the Romans. Jesus doesn't do either, but turns the subject on its head.

Luke 13: 1 – 3

1. Imagine this scenario: Terrorists have just crashed into the twin towers and that is reported to Jesus. What response would you expect from him?
2. What subject does Jesus introduce and how does it relate to the terrible thing that has been reported?
3. I have heard reports of people who happened to sleep in on September 11<sup>th</sup> or were sick and missed work or got caught up in traffic. Apply these words of Jesus to this scenario: *Do you think that these New Yorkers were worse sinners than all the other New Yorkers because they suffered this way?* What is the issue being raised by Jesus regarding God's will?
4. How does the next line fit? *"I tell you, no! Unless you repent, you too will all perish."* What is Jesus saying by this statement and who is he challenging?

*The first situation deals with tragedy caused by human evil – the enemy has struck and taken lives. This second tragedy could be in the category of, "an act of God". How do we understand suffering when it is by the hand of another human verses what we call by the hand of God? Consider the Tsunami or New Orleans as you reflect on Jesus' question.*

Luke 13: 4 – 5

1. What is the connection between sin and suffering? Look also at John 9: 1 – 9 and Luke 5:19.
2. In one reference, the word is 'sinner' and the second reference the word is 'debtor'. Sinner refers to the sins of commission, and Debtors refers to the sins of omission. Jesus is showing that there is no difference between the two and both call for repentance. Consider this statement:

*Jesus refuses to discuss the suffering of the politically oppressed without broadening the discussion to include other types of sufferers. Those who suffer political oppression often quickly assume that their suffering is the only kind that matters, and a crass indifference may then develop to the suffering of others around them. . . the more intense the struggle for justice, the more the oppressed tend to assume their own righteousness. This assumption of righteousness at times expresses itself as arrogance that refuses any criticism . . . "Our cause is righteous, thus we are righteous."*

*(Kenneth Bailey)*

3. Name situations where those with a righteous cause have crossed the line and become unrighteous in their actions and attitudes.

4. What does Jesus want the people to consider through this comment?

Luke 13: 6 – 9

1. Read Isaiah 5:7. It is a well known image that the vineyard refers to Israel and the Jewish people. It is not unheard of for a fig tree to be planted within the vineyard because the fig tree bears fruit 10 months of the year. However a fig tree can draw nutrients away from the fertility of the vineyard, so if it did not produce fruit, it would be harmful to the rest of the field.
2. The fig tree represents the Jewish leaders. What happens to the people when the leadership does not bear fruit?
3. Leviticus 19: 23 – 25 tells about fruit that is ready to eat. From this information, how long will this tree have been planted and barren?
4. What is the story of mercy in this parable and who is asking for mercy?

*The conversation between the owner of the vineyard and his workmen is reminiscent of rabbinical passages in which the attributes of God debate, the attribute of justice with the attribute of mercy. If God dealt with Israel by strict justice, Israel would perish. But he does not. He gives another chance. And if it is madness to fly in the face of His justice, it is desperate wickedness to flout his mercy. (Kenneth Bailey)*

5. So, we do not have God as the one ready to destroy and Jesus asking for mercy in this parable – that is not the allegory. It is the God of justice and the God of mercy finding the solution to bring Israel into the kingdom.
6. Wordplay “fsuqih” (dig it out) shbuqih (forgive it). How do you wrestle with the tension between seeking justice and showing mercy in your own life?

Summary

1. The spiritual leaders of the household of faith are planted in God’s vineyard and are expected to produce fruit for him.
2. When that leadership is fruitless it not only fails in its own obedience but also sterilizes the community around it. God cares for the community and will not tolerate this situation indefinitely
3. Mercy is extended to unfruitful leadership in the form of forgiveness and renewing grace.
4. Only God’s tender care can forgive and renew – the leaders cannot renew themselves, as the tree cannot tend for itself.
5. God’s offer of mercy must evoke a response from within or renewal will not take place and judgement will be inevitable.

Relate this to the church today. What kind of accountability is required of our church leaders? Where is mercy required but also where should a call to repentance and renewal be made? What is our responsibility as church members toward our Christian leaders?

## **Lesson 6: The Great Banquet – Luke 14: 15 – 24**

This parable requires quite a bit of background material in order to understand the cultural context of the characters involved. To begin, read Luke 14: 1 – 14 to gain a sense of the context of this discussion. Jesus is once again dining with Pharisees as an invited rabbi, and once again he is being tested by the situation. The first test has to do with healing on the Sabbath; the second has to do with the spiritual leaders' attitudes toward position and power.

1. What hypocrisy does Jesus expose regarding the actions and attitudes of the Pharisees and the Sabbath?
2. What attitude is he challenging regarding their motives for hospitality?
3. Talk about the meaning of true humility and what attitudes have we as Christians presented to the world that are anything but humble.

### ***Cultural Background***

*In the parable of the Great Banquet, it is important to understand how a banquet was put on and the invitations extended. A man would send out his servants with an initial invitation to decide who could come to his special banquet. The number of people who accepted the invitation determined the amount of meat that would be cooked, since everything was butchered fresh. If only a few could attend, then fowl would be served. If 10 or 15 accepted the invitation, then a lamb would be butchered and served, and if it was a very large gathering, they would kill the fatted calf for the event. If you accepted the initial invitation, you were obliged to attend and fulfill your commitment.*

*Once the number of guests was determined, and the meal prepared, then the servants would be sent with the second invitation to inform the expected guests that the meal was ready and now was the time. For a person to not show up after saying that he would attend was extremely rude and unacceptable behavior. So, now we understand that the excuses offered by the three guests were not as reasonable and acceptable as we might think in our culture.*

1. *The man who bought a field would have been negotiating for months on the deal and would have walked every inch of that field before purchase. Land deals in the Middle East are extremely slow and meticulous. This guest would have known long in advance the state of the sale and certainly would not need to see the field once he had purchased it.*
2. *Likewise, the man who purchased oxen would have tested them many times to make certain they pulled as a team before purchase. There would be no need to 'try them out' after they were bought. This is a terribly lame excuse that the host would see right through and know he had been insulted.*
3. *Wedding celebrations could last anywhere from 7 – 14 days and it is absolutely certain that a man who was getting married would not have accepted the invitation to begin with, knowing the length of time involved. Also, women were never mentioned in a public setting and so even mentioning that he would be spending time with his wife was intensely rude*

*and without social precedent. It would be a slap in the host's face. This man doesn't even ask to be excused, he just says, I won't come.*

1. As you think about these excuses, how does this shed new light on the story that Jesus told?
2. His audience was a group of Pharisees. What was Jesus challenging them with by this story? How were the Pharisees snubbing the invitation of God to the messianic banquet?
3. The Pharisees were rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. How did they continue to insult Jesus by their actions?
4. What are the excuses that people have today for not accepting the invitation of Jesus?

*The idea of a sacred meal with God is deeply imbedded in the Old Testament. Read Isaiah 25: 6 – 9. Notice the word "all" and how often it is used. Who was the banquet for? In later times, the Pharisees felt that the Messianic banquet would only be for the Jewish faithful. Even later, the Essenes – a group of very religious Jewish followers believed that only whole, healthy Jews would be at the banquet, not anyone lame or blind, etc.*

1. How does this parable reverse the exclusiveness that the Jewish leaders had believed and taught?
2. The first invitation was to the community of the host of same social standing. When his community refused his invitation, he invited those of a different social status. Would these guests ever be able to return the invitation to the host? What does that tell us about God's grace?
3. The third invitation goes beyond the community – to the highways and byways. This would relate to the Gentiles. The words "compel them" or "make them" are important, for last minute invitations were always refused. A person might extend an invitation to be polite and so the invitation would be turned down several times. The Host would have to convince the person that they were truly wanted at the meal. What hope does this give us for people who initially refuse to accept Christ?
4. In what ways is Christianity exclusive about who might be at the final banquet? Should we be more open to whom Jesus may include in the final celebration?
5. The last invitation is left open. There is still room at the banquet. Who will end up filling the tables in the last days? Will it be "Christians" or might we be surprised at who will come?

## **Lesson 7 – The Obedient Servant: Luke 12: 35 – 38, Luke 17: 7 – 10**

The primary parable we will study in this lesson is the one found in Luke 17, but we will begin by comparing this parable to one found in Luke, chapter 12. Jesus seems to use the same imagery to give us two separate messages. Who is a master and who is a servant and what are our expectations of each is the question we must struggle with in this study.

Read Luke 12: 35 – 38

1. What do you think is the primary point that Jesus is conveying with this parable?
2. What is the warning?
3. What is the hope?
4. What is the surprise?
5. Read Mark 10:45: How does Jesus view his ministry, not only in this life but in the life to come?
6. What is your role in the coming of the Kingdom? In practical ways, how do believers stay watchful and what service keeps us ready for his return?

Now Read Luke 17: 7 – 10

1. What appears to be contradictory to the story told in Luke 12?
2. What appears harsh and uncaring?
3. What do you think is the primary point of this parable?

### ***Cultural Background***

*It is questionable as to whether the disciples had servants or owned slaves by the way Jesus introduced this parable. It is very possible, for the poorest of the poor let their children out as servants so that they could at least be fed. Even people of very little means would have such servants in their home as a way of helping the poor. In this story, the servant mentioned is both the plowman/herdsman and also the cook; therefore the master is of modest means. If the disciples themselves did not have servants, they would be very familiar with the customs surrounding servants and masters as it was the dominant practice. Jesus is not condoning the use of servants or slaves, but simply stating what is.*

*Luke 12 contains a shocking twist, for a master to serve his own servants is unheard of! This is a dramatic reversal of roles that would stun the listeners. Luke 17 is not so shocking as it is the way things would be done – the expected.*

1. So which parable makes you more unsettled and why? In our culture, what are our expectations?

2. Are we comfortable with the idea of servants and masters? Which role, if any, are you more comfortable in and why? Can you relate this parable to any modern day roles or practices that we have in our culture today?
3. Are women more comfortable in the role of servant than men or is this a cultural stereotype?
4. Are we too self-reliant to allow others to serve us?
5. Read John 15:15, Rev. 3:20. In the Middle East, the Master is NOT the equal of his servant and a master would never eat with his servant. Jesus eats with his disciples and even eats with sinners. How do the actions and teachings of Jesus seem in conflict with the parable in Luke 17?
6. If you remember the movie, "Driving Miss Daisy", how did the role of servant turn into the role of friend? Is there any principle regarding how we can be both servant and friend of Jesus?

*The primary question we need to deal with in his passage is the idea of merit and grace. If a servant has fulfilled the tasks that were required of him, is there any merit or favor due to him? Is the master indebted to him because he adequately fulfilled his duties? The answer is a resounding NO!*

*There is a variance in the translation of verse 10 that can change the meaning of the servant's response. Rather than reading, "We are unworthy servants . . .", it is more accurately translated, "We are servants with no need". An example of a dialogue from today in Middle Eastern Culture could be:*

House Owner says: *fi haja?* (Literally: "Is there any need?)  
 Meaning: 'Do I owe you anything?')

Worker replies *ma fi haya* (Literally: "There is no need."  
 Meaning: "You owe me nothing")

*In our text, the servant's response is, "We have no need – you owe us nothing".*

1. Therefore, as servants of God, does God owe us anything? Should we expect any specific reward or special treatment because we are faithful?
2. Is our heavenly destination a reward? Is it deserved? Or is it grace?
3. What is our motivation for serving Jesus?
4. How is Jesus giving us a warning about our attitudes that may need adjusting when it comes to how we serve our God?
5. Consider the different denominational styles of worship: Mainline Protestant Churches with a formalized style of worship tend toward a style of worship that accentuates the majesty of God and approach with reverence. Evangelicals have been accused of being too 'buddy, buddy' with Christ and informal to the point of irreverence in their worship. Any comments on this in relation to this parable?
6. Who is the true Master and what must our attitude be toward our Master?

## Lesson 8: The Judge and the Widow – Luke 18: 1 – 8

We are so familiar with looking at parables as similes – as in, “The kingdom of heaven is like a . . .” so when we encounter this parable, it can be hard to switch our ideas to what God is NOT like, rather than what he is like. God is certainly NOT like the unjust judge, so what is Jesus saying with this comparison?

### *Cultural Background*

*An “unjust judge” was not an uncommon phenomenon in the days of Jesus in the Middle East and may not be that uncommon today. Most cases were decided by the size of the bribe rather than any cause for justice. In order to receive a favorable judgment from the courts, one needed to either be a person of great personal influence, or able to pay the judge to decide in one’s favor. Often, many people would stand before the judge and shout for their case to be heard, and the one who gained the judge’s attention would receive a hearing. Women were very rarely seen before the courts. This was a man’s world who knew how to play the system. So, from this background we gain a few understandings:*

- 1. The judge was not there by position of conscience or for a sense of justice. He was there for the prestige and power. He did not fear God or operate from any moral basis. He is there for his own gain.*
- 2. The judge had no sense of “shame”, which was a highly valued character trait in Mid Eastern Society. One must feel shame for a deed – to have a sense of remorse. To feel “no shame”, which is the translation of “nor cared about men” was the worst offense of which a person could be accused. Worse, the judge acknowledges himself that he does not fear God or have any sense of shame. This is a man with no conscience whatsoever.*
- 3. The widow must be a woman with no man to advocate for her and so must come to the courts alone. She had no money to bribe the judge and no person of influence to speak for her. **She is the symbol of helplessness and powerlessness.***

### Questions to Consider for Luke 18: 1 - 5

1. What is the main message that you receive from this parable regarding prayer?
2. What does this parable portray about God’s desire to answer prayer? Does anything make you uncomfortable in this illustration?
3. Read Math. 7: 9 – 11. How does this passage help enlighten our understanding of God versus the Unjust Judge?
4. What is the hardest aspect that you find about prayer?
5. What challenges your faith in prayer?
6. How often do you come to prayer in complete helplessness and powerlessness? How often do we come expecting an answer?
7. What do you admire about the widow?



Quote from Frederick Buechner from his book *Wishful Thinking*, pg. 71

*Be importunate, Jesus says – not, one assumes, because you have to beat a path to God’s door before he’ll open it, but because until you beat the path maybe there’s no way of getting to YOUR door. “Ravish my heart”, John Donne wrote. But God will not usually ravish. He will only court. . . . Even if it seems (your prayers go unanswered), keep beating the path to God’s door, because the one thing you can be sure of is that down the path you beat with even your most half-cocked and halting prayer the God you call upon will finally come, and even if he does not bring you the answer you want, he will bring you himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers, that is what we are really praying for.*

Luke 18: 6 – 8

Jesus now expands on the implications of the personal prayers to the greater issues of justice for all his children. There is a wonderful Greek word that describes most beautifully the nature and action of God. He is “makrothumia” which is most often translated “slow to anger”. The literal translation of these verses reads:

*Shall not God make vindication for his chosen?  
the ones crying to him day and night?  
Also he is slow to anger over them.  
I say to you that he shall make vindication for them speedily  
Yet when the Son of man comes will he find faith on earth?*

The verses imply that God will bring about justice for the oppressed, but he will be patient with a season of grace toward his elect. Even the chosen ones of God – those that suffer for his sake must search themselves. If God’s wrath is called down upon the oppressors, it is also deserving upon the oppressed, for “all have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God”. We must compare these verses with a known Jewish writing that Jesus was familiar with from Ben Sirach:

*And the Lord will not delay  
Neither will he be slow to anger with them  
Till he crushes the loins of the unmerciful,  
And repays vengeance on the nations.*

Jesus changes this known teaching to show the people that God is merciful, not only to the oppressed but the oppressors as well. God is makrothumia toward all his children. The question remains, “Who will stay faithful until his return?”

1. Where will Jesus find this faith that he is looking for? Will he find it in our church? Will he find it in our lives?
2. What is Jesus looking for?

## Lesson 9: The Pharisee and the Tax Collector – Luke 18: 9 - 14

As we read this parable, there is little that will come as a surprise to us regarding its intended meaning. This is a parable about our attitudes in worship and in prayer. The primary discussion in this study has to do with the interpretation of the text as to whether this is a private experience or a public setting.

Read Luke 18: 9 – 14 and compare the various versions in your group with the following translation and note any differences:

*And he said to certain people who considered themselves righteous and despised others, this parable*

*“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector.*

*The Pharisee stood by himself thus praying, ‘God, I thank thee, because I am not like other men, extortionists, unjust, adulterers, even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all I possess.’*

*But the tax collector, standing afar off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but he beat upon his chest saying, ‘God! Make an atonement for me, a sinner.’*

*I tell you, he went down to his house, made righteous, rather than that one.”  
For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*

There are several points to take note of in interpreting this parable for our own lives

1. The setting of this story is public, corporate worship, according to the translation of verse 11. The sacrifices for atonement were offered each day and those who went to worship would utter their prayers aloud during the burning of the incense. The key interpretative difference is whether the Pharisee was standing by himself, or praying to himself.
2. The fact that the Pharisee was standing alone in a public setting of worship is significant. He likely was afraid that he might touch someone that would make him unclean. Therefore, he not only held his righteousness above the tax collector, but also above everyone else in the temple.
3. It is likely that he was praying out loud in a way that would ‘instruct’ those around him, rather than praying quietly to himself.
4. He brags about doing even more than the law requires, by fasting twice a week, instead of just once a week, and tithing on all of his possessions, not just an agricultural tithe, which was the cultural standard expectation.
5. The tax collector stands apart, not because he fears being made unclean, but because he might cause others to become unclean.
6. He beats his breasts in remorse. Traditionally, only women would beat their breasts in mourning or anguish. It was very rare that a man would beat his breast and even more rare, to do so in public. The tax collector was extremely distraught.

## Questions to Consider:

1. Describe the Pharisee. What is going on in his head and in his heart?
2. The standard Jewish prayer was to begin with adoration and then to request help. What is the content of his prayer? Why did he even pray?
3. How did his prayer take him father from God rather than to draw him closer?
4. What elements of prayer draw you into the presence of God?
5. How did the Pharisee's attitude remove him from the fellowship of community?
6. In what ways can our attitudes harm our relationships within the church community?
7. What aspects of our worship should be a public expression of community?
8. What aspects of public worship are private and personal?
9. What was wrong with the 'eyesight' of the Pharisee?

1. Describe the Tax Collector. What is going on in his head and his heart?
2. What was the content of his prayer? Why did he pray?
3. How did his attitude in prayer draw him into the presence of God?
4. Can you share an incident when you have 'beat your breast' before God? What was the result of that experience of prayer?
5. How did the Tax Collector's situation remove him from the fellowship of his community?
6. Has sin ever pulled you out of community? How did that hurt your healing?
7. Do you feel there is any place for public confession?
8. What is the source of our righteousness?
9. What can we do to improve our 'eyesight' to see people as God sees them?

What impacts me in this parable is the tendency to criticize the Pharisee and praise the tax collector. However, in all honesty, our prayers are more often like the Pharisee and not humble like the tax collector. Most often, we do thank God for all the blessing we have been given in North America and thank him that we are not poor, oppressed or destitute. I ask the question again – how often do we truly in full, public humiliation beat our breasts before God in anguish for the way we live. If we were truly able to scrutinize our hearts and the attitudes of our North American Culture, we would be groveling before God for forgiveness for the way our nation oppresses other nations – how the rich continue to take from the poor.

I know that I need to confess before God that I am more Pharisee than I ever want to admit and am not nearly enough like the tax collector in humility and desperation.

God, make us all that desperate!

## Lesson 10: The Camel and the Needle – Luke 18: 18 – 30

We will be revisiting some common themes in this parable and then recapping the primary lessons from what we have studied. The question is asked once again, “What must I DO to INHERIT eternal life?” And in answer to the question, Jesus again refers to the law and to a parable. (See Lesson 3) Here we have a wealthy man that is used to doing everything for himself and so he will struggle with Jesus’ answer.

READ the text:

1. The ruler begins with a compliment by addressing Jesus as “Good Teacher”. In this culture, a compliment given expects a compliment returned. Jesus does not return the compliment by saying, “O Noble Ruler”; in fact he does not address the man at all, but rather challenges his compliment. “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” Jesus is asking the ruler, “Do you truly believe that about me?”

*Question: What is missing when people acknowledge that Jesus was a “good man” but that is all they are willing to say?*

2. Jesus goes on to list a few of the commandments, but they are listed out of order and deal with two specific loyalties, loyalty to property and loyalty to family. The man could very definitely answer in affirmative to obeying these laws, for they were the highest held values of their society. One must honor the parents by remaining with and caring for them until they have passed on. A good son would then inherit the land and ensure that the land remained in the family for many generations. These two loyalties were unquestioned in the Middle East Culture

*Question: So what does Jesus ask of the man, when he now says, “One thing you still lack. Sell everything you have and come and follow me?”*

3. Now Jesus responds to this man’s grief with a parable. What interpretations have you heard regarding the camel and the eye of a needle?
4. Author Kenneth Bailey is strong in his opinion that there is no “loop hole” to understanding this parable. It is not “almost impossible” – it is truly impossible. A camel is the largest animal in the Middle East and a needle is the smallest hole one can imagine. Jesus wants to be clear that it is *absolutely impossible to gain your own way into the kingdom of God*”. What are ways that we still try to gain reward by our own merit?
5. Even the disciples are stunned with Jesus’ response. Then how is salvation possible? Likely the rich ruler was quite philanthropic in the community – even he cannot be saved? This is too hard! But Jesus points to the source of all miracle: God. “What is impossible with men is possible with God.” What grace is Jesus referring to?

These Verses are laid out in a pattern as follows:

Vs 18	Eternal Life
Vs 19 – 21	Old Law Requirements (fulfilled)
Vs 22	New Obedience Explained
Vs. 23	New Obedience too Hard!
Vs. 24 - 25	Entrance to the Kingdom
Vs. 26	New Obedience too Hard!
Vs. 27	New Obedience Possible with God
Vs. 28 - 30	New Requirements fulfilled by disciples
Vs. 30	Eternal Life

We see from this that entrance into the Kingdom of God is an act of God, not by the will of mankind, but the will of God. When Peter says that they have left everything to follow Jesus, he is an example that God is performing miracles and working among them. It is not that the disciples are so wonderful that they can do what the rich man cannot, but rather, by God's grace, they have been able to leave behind their own cultural pressures to follow Jesus. And Jesus says there is reward in that.

1. What ways will we be asked to break away from the cultural expectations of our day in order to be a true follower of Jesus?
2. When has your walk with Jesus been a challenge to being loyal to your family? Has it cost you much to be a Christian?
3. How does this passage affirm that Jesus is truly the Messiah and worthy of being addressed as "good"?
4. What holds us back – what "possessions" can be valued more than being a true follower of Jesus?

Look back over the last 10 lessons and think of examples that affirm the following lessons:

1. The love of God is offered freely and cannot be earned.
2. There are high costs to following Jesus.
3. By accepting the freely offered love of God, our response comes in the form of costly acts of love.
4. Following the way of Jesus is the same as following the way of God. Jesus is truly the Way, the Truth and the Life.