

A Lenten Journey Through the Parables

3. Parables About Grace and Responsibility.

Parables About Discipleship

Sunday, March 11, 2012

10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor

Presenter: David Monyak

St. John in the Wilderness

References

- **The Parables of Jesus**, by David Wenham. IVP Academic, 1989. ISBN 978-04308-12864
- **The Parables. Understanding the Stories Jesus Told**, by Simon J Kistemaker. Baker Books, 1980. ISBN-13: 978-0801063916
- **A Journey Through the Parables**, by Rev. John Jay Hughes. Audio CD Course. Now You Know Media. **Stories Jesus Told. Modern Meditations on the Parables**, by Rev. John Jay Hughes, Liguori, 1991. ISBN 0-7648-0413-8
- **Stories with Intent. A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus**, by Klyne Snodgrass, 2008, Eerdmans Publishing Co., ISBN-13: 978-0-8028-4241-1
- *Audio excerpts from:* **The Listener's NIV MP3 Audio Bible**, narrated by Max McLean

Today

Grouping as per *Stories with Intent*

- **Parables About Grace and Responsibility**
 - **The Unforgiving Servant = The Unmerciful Servant** (Matthew 18:23-35)
- **Parables about Discipleship**
 - **The Good Samaritan** (Luke 10:25-37)
 - **The Workers in the Vineyard** (Matthew 20:1-16)
 - **The Tower Builder and the Warring King** (Luke 14:28-32)

O Lord Jesus, because, being surrounded with infirmities we often sin and have to ask pardon, help us to forgive as we would be forgiven; neither mentioning old offences committed against us, nor dwelling upon them in thought, nor being influenced by them in heart; but loving our brother freely, as you freely loved us. For your name's sake.

- poet Christina Rossetti, 1830-1894

Parables About Grace and Responsibility

**Parables About Grace
and Responsibility:
The Unforgiving Servant
(Matthew 18:21-35)**

The Unforgiving Servant

Gospel Context

- Parable lies at the end of Jesus' fourth major speech in Matthew (18:1-35), the so-called "ecclesiastical discourse" giving instructions for the church:
 - 1-5: theme of imitating and receiving children
 - 6-9: warning about causing others to stumble
 - 10-14: God's love for the lost
 - 15-20: instructions on communal discipline
 - 21-22: teaching on forgiveness
 - 23-35: parable of the Unforgiving Servant

The Unforgiving Servant

Matthew 18:21-35



*Voice of Max
McLean*

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”

Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

“The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he

demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.” (NIV)

The Unforgiving Servant

Background

- Debt was a major problem in first century Palestine because the poor lived on the edge of starvation and ruin and often had to resort to the mercies of the money-lender when things did not work out.
- The debtor in the parable however is no ordinary debtor:
 - The size of the debt – **10,000 talents** – suggest he is a state official, perhaps a provincial governor
- The use of the passive – he was “brought in” suggest he has been hauled in before the ruler by the royal guards.

The Unforgiving Servant

Background

- The amount of the man's debt would have caused Jesus' hearers to gasp in disbelief.
- A "talent" was the largest unit of money in use.
- Herod the Great is estimated to have had a *total annual income* of **900 talents**:
 - The areas of Judea, Idumea, and Samaria paid six hundred talents in taxes annually; Galilee and Perea paid two hundred talents; and Batanea with Trachonitis as well as Auranitis paid one hundred talents.
- The amount of the debt owed by the servant – **10,000 talents** – is staggering, so incredibly enormous no ordinary human being could *ever* hope to pay it.

The Unforgiving Servant

Background

- The king orders that the man, his wife and children and all that he has be sold to meet the debt.
- Slavery was widespread in the ancient world (although not so much in Palestine as elsewhere), and inability to pay a debt was a common reason someone ended up a slave.
- According to Jewish law only a robber unable to restore what he had stolen could be enslaved. Other family members were immune from such punishment. The king therefore is being portrayed as a tyrannical *Gentile* monarch.
- The crowd listening to Jesus would have been very surprised that such a Gentile king would show any mercy, let alone mercy on such a scale.

The Unforgiving Servant

Background

- The unit of money called a “**denarius**” was the amount earned by a manual laborer in one day.
 - (In a later parable today – “The Workers in the Vineyard,” the workers are promised **one denarius** for working all day in the vineyard.)
- The money owed to the forgiven servant by his fellow servant (fellow government official?) – **100 denarii** – could easily be paid, given reasonable time.

The Unforgiving Servant

Background

- The fellow servant gets throw into prison:
 - Imagine a very unpleasant and insanitary lock-up, where the prisoner would be chained or in the stocks, getting rough treatment, held until his family or friends came up with the money.
- When the king hears about what the Unforgiving Servant has done, he has the unforgiving servant arrested and handed over to ‘torturers’ until he pays off all of his original debt (an apparent impossibility)
- Jewish law forbid torture, but it was used by people like Herod the Great, a favorite way of persuading people to pay their debts.

The Unforgiving Servant

Interpretation

- This parable brings together several key strands of Jesus' ethical teaching:
 - The immense, undeserved **love and forgiveness of God**
 - Our **right and proper response** to God's love and forgiveness: love and forgiveness of others
 - There is such a thing as **judgment**: a judgment whether we have *rightly and properly* received our undeserved gift of forgiveness, our undeserved gift of membership in the Kingdom of God.
- The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew focuses in particular on:
 - God's forgiveness, and
 - our proper response to that forgiveness.

The Unforgiving Servant

Interpretation

- The king:
 - Almighty God, gracious and merciful to us
- The king's servant:
 - ourselves, owing an enormous debt to God which we cannot hope to repay
- The debt:
 - Our lives, the burden of our sins and the misuse of our freedom
 - Colossians 2:13-14: "He pardoned all our sins. He canceled the bond that stood against us with all its claims, snatching it up and nailing it to the cross"
- The fellow servant:
 - Our neighbor

The Unforgiving Servant

Application

- Good News:
 - No matter how enormous and hopeless the debt to God we rack up, God will forgive us.
- Warning:
 - We must take seriously what we are saying when we pray (as Jesus taught us to do): “Lord, forgive us our sins *as we forgive those who sin against us.*”

Parables About Discipleship

**Parables About
Discipleship:
The Good Samaritan
(Luke 10:25-37)**

The Good Samaritan

Gospel Context

- Jesus tells this parable during his journey with his disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51 to 19:48).
- Jesus has been instructing his disciples about himself and the nature of discipleship.

The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37



*Voice of Max
McLean*

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

He answered: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the

other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

(NIV)

The Good Samaritan

Background – Jericho Road

- Road from Jerusalem to Jericho only 17 miles long
 - Road was very rudimentary and rough.
 - The famous and excellent Roman road system had not yet been extended to Palestine.
- Over those seventeen miles it descended steeply (3,300 feet, from Jerusalem at 2,500 feet above sea-level to Jericho at 770 feet below) through desolate and craggy limestone hills
 - Area virtually uninhabited, without vegetation, and marked by limestone cliffs and gullies on both sides of the road.
- In Biblical times called “the path [ascent] of blood,” most probably because it was unsafe.
- From time to time bandits hiding behind the limestone rocks robbed travelers.

The Good Samaritan

Background – Priests, Levites

- The **priests** were the clergy responsible for the worship and sacrifices of the temple in Jerusalem
- The **Levites** assisted the priests in these and other temple duties
 - examples: providing worship music, maintaining security in the temple buildings.
- Both were literally a class apart in Jewish society, and expected to observe high standards of **ritual purity** for their sacred ministry.

The Good Samaritan

Background – Priests, Levites

- **Ritual purity** required *by law* that priests and Levites not touch a corpse. If they did so, they would be:
 - barred from priestly and Levitical services
 - considered unclean socially
 - responsible for the costs of burying the corpse
- Many of the priests and Levites lived in the fertile Jericho region (famous for its date plantations, and a delightfully warm place to stay in winter),
 - trips along the Jerusalem to Jericho road would be routine for them.

The Good Samaritan

Background – Samaritans

- Samaritans and Jews mutually hated each other in Jesus' day.
- Samaritans were descendants of the people settled in Palestine by the Assyrians in the eighth century BC (2 Kings 17:24-41), and regarded by Jews as half-breeds and semi-pagan.
- Samaritans lived in *central* Palestine *between*:
 - Jewish **Judea** in the South
 - Jewish **Galilee** in the North.

The Good Samaritan

Background – Samaritans

- Samaritans had built their own temple on Mount Gerizim, an “in your face” rejection of the temple in Jerusalem, and in 128 BC, the (briefly) independent nation of Israel attacked Samaria, mercilessly destroying the temple and the city.
- When Rome conquered Palestine in 63 BC, they forced Jewish settlers out of Samaria.
- Some time between 6 to 9 AD, a group of Samaritans snuck into the temple of Jerusalem and desecrated the temple by sprinkling the altar with human bones.
- Just before Jesus tells this parable in Luke 10:25-37, Samaritan villagers (Luke 9:53) had refused to give Jesus lodging, “because he was on his way to Jerusalem.”

The Good Samaritan

Background – Money

- The Samaritan gives the innkeeper “**two silver coins**” in the NIV translation. In the NRSV, it is explicitly noted to be “**two denarii**”
 - one “**denarius**” was the amount earned by a manual laborer in one day.
 - In our next parable today – “The Workers in the Vineyard,” the workers are promised **one denarius** for working all day in the vineyard.
 - Two denarii would have paid for about 24 nights of stay in a typical inn.

The Good Samaritan

Background – Commandments

- The two great commandments, linked by the word “love”:
 - Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (NIV)
 - Leviticus 19:18b: “... you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” (NIV)

The Good Samaritan

Background – Neighbor

- In Jesus' day, a Jew envisioned himself in a circular world:
 - Himself at the center,
 - Then his immediate relatives,
 - Then his kinsmen,
 - Then (at the outside of the circle) those who claimed Jewish descent and those who were converts to Judaism.
- You might provide help to someone in your circle, particular someone close in your circle (immediate kinsmen), and you could deny help to those outside your circle.
- “neighbor” often implied:
 - Someone in your circle, particularly close in your circle
 - An assumed reciprocity: he would help me and I would help him, because we are immediate relatives, or we are kinsmen, or we are fellow Jews.

The Good Samaritan

Interpretation

- The usual interpretation:
 - Good Samaritan → the role model we should aspire to.
 - The man mugged by robbers → our neighbor.
- What is the *right and proper response* to God's generous **forgiveness** and **unconditional love** of us?
- In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, we learned the *right and proper response* to **God's forgiveness** of our own debt: we in turn should forgive others without limitation.

The Good Samaritan

Interpretation

- In the Parable of Good Samaritan, Jesus' answer to the question "Who is my neighbor," we learn:
 - The *right and proper response* to **God's unconditional love** of us: we in turn should love our **neighbor**
 - Who our **neighbor** is: Jesus has radically redefined **neighbor** to mean *anyone* in need, *regardless* of whether they can offer anything in return
 - What "**love our neighbor**" requires: practicing the radical mercy and love displayed by Good Samaritan.

The Good Samaritan

Application

- What might this parable be telling us about the various protective barriers we erect about ourselves to live a life sheltered from the unpleasantness of the world?
- In practice, how might we show the radical mercy of the Good Samaritan to those unfortunate people “lying beside the Jericho Road of human life”?
- In practice, how might affluent nations show the radical mercy of the Good Samaritan to alleviate the suffering and poverty in underdeveloped countries?

The Good Samaritan

Another Interpretation

- In the usual interpretation:
 - Good Samaritan → ourselves
 - The man mugged by robbers → our neighbor
- In a parallel interpretation of the parable:
 - The Good Samaritan, a social outcast rejected by most → Jesus
 - The man mugged by robbers → ourselves, helpless to save ourselves.
- The parable becomes an image of God's love and care for us – as well as a call that we should go and do likewise.

**Parables About
Discipleship:
The Workers in the
Vineyard
(Matthew 20:1-16)**

The Workers in the Vineyard

Gospel Context

- Just before the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard a rich young man had come to Jesus asking about eternal life. He “went away sad” after Jesus’ call to him to give up everything and to follow him.
- Jesus then comments to his astonished disciples how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.
- Peter then asks: “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”
- Jesus replies: “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. (Matthew 19:28-30)
- Then Jesus tells his disciples this parable:

The Workers in the Vineyard

Matthew 20:1-16



*Voice of Max
McLean*

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

“About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.

“He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’

“‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.

“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and

going on to the first.’

“The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.

“These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’

“But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (NIV)

The Workers in the Vineyard

Background

- It is likely additional workmen are needed in the vineyard because it is September, when the grapes are harvested.
- The period from sunrise to sunset in Israel during the month of September is approximately 6 am to 6 pm.
 - The September sun can still be quite hot in Israel
- 6 am to 6 pm would be the normal work day that time of year for Jewish workers:
 - 10 hours of work
 - 2 hours of rest for meals and prayers

The Workers in the Vineyard

Background

- Once the owner of a vineyard has determined it is time to harvest the grapes, the work had to be done quickly.
- All servants who worked for him year round would be out “early in the morning” (6 am), and the owner would visit the marketplace in a nearby town or village at the crack of dawn for additional workers.
- The owner goes out several more times during the day to hire workers:
 - Third hour: 9 am
 - Sixth hour: 12 noon
 - Ninth hour: 3 pm
 - Eleventh hour: 5 pm (one hour before end of work day)

The Workers in the Vineyard

Background

- The workers hired at the break of day are promised **one denarius** for their days wages – a good and fair wage.
- The workers hired at 9 am, 12 noon, 3 pm are told they will be paid “whatever is right.”
- The workers hired at 5 pm are simply told to go to the vineyard and starting working.
- Workers were permitted to eat as many of the grapes as they desire.
 - A vineyard owner expected to lose nearly 3 percent of the yield this way.

The Workers in the Vineyard

Background

- Workers were paid at the end of the day, heeding biblical injunctions:
 - Leviticus 19:13 “... You shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.”
 - Deuteronomy 24:15 “Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and counting on it. Otherwise he may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin.”
- Usually, those hired first were paid first, but the owner ordered his foreman to reverse the usual order.

The Workers in the Vineyard

Interpretation

- This is not a parable about social or economic justice.
- It is a parable about the nature of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom characterized:
 - NOT by a strict application of justice, where everyone gets what they deserve, but rather
 - By God's love, mercy, and generosity. By God's freely given grace.
 - Grace = God's unmerited mercy, the power of God to redeem and transform human beings
 - This grace is not divvied up according to merit, good deeds, number of goals achieved, but given fully and freely to all who come to him in faith.

The Workers in the Vineyard

Interpretation

- Before Jesus told the parable, Peter wanted to know what he and the other disciples would receive for following Jesus. Jesus tells him he would receive untold spiritual blessing (Matt 19:28-30), ending with “But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”
- Jesus then tells the Parable, ending it with: “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (Matt 20:16)
- What does the “first will be last, last will be first” mean?
 - In the kingdom of heaven equality is the rule.
 - Even though the work of Jesus’ disciples may vary, that work is transcended by a reward that is equal for all: God’s gift of grace, sufficient for all, given fully and freely for all.

The Workers in the Vineyard

Interpretation

- “Bookkeeping is the only punishable offense in the kingdom of heaven. For in that happy state, the books are ignored forever, and there is only the Book of life... If the world could have been saved by bookkeeping it would have been saved by Moses, not Jesus. The law was just fine. And God gave it a good thousand years or so to see if anyone could pass a test like that. But when nobody did—when it became perfectly clear that there was “no one who was righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10; Psalm 14:1-3), that “both Jews and Gentiles alike were all under the power of sin” (Romans 3:9)—God gave up on salvation by the books. He canceled everybody’s records in the death of Jesus and rewarded us all, equally and fully, with a new creation in the resurrection of the dead.”
- - Robert Capon, *The Parables of Judgment*, Eerdmans, 1991

The Workers in the Vineyard

Application

- Good News:
 - It is never too late to join the revolution of the Kingdom of God and fully and freely receive God's grace
- Warning:
 - We must not forget the message from the Parable for the Unforgiving Servant: there will be a judgment on how we respond to God's grace, love and forgiveness.
 - The appropriate response is to live Christlike lives, giving love, forgiveness and mercy to others.

**Parables About
Discipleship:
The Tower Builder and the
Warring King
(Luke 14:28-32)**

Tower Builder & Warring King

Gospel Context

- Like the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus tells this parable during his journey with his disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51 to 19:48).
- Jesus has been instructing his disciples about himself and the nature of discipleship.
- Just before the parable, in Luke 14:25-27, we read:
 - Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters — yes, even his own life — he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” (NIV)
- Then Jesus tells the Parable of the Tower Builder and the Warring King:

Tower Builder & Warring King

Luke 14:28-33



*Voice of Max
McLean*

“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’

“Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.” (NIV)

Tower Builder & Warring King

Background - Hate

- Jesus says just before telling the parable: “If anyone comes to me and does not **hate** his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters — yes, even his own life — he cannot be my disciple.”
- The requirement to “**hate**” is a Semitic exaggeration and may reflect an idiom which means “**love less than**” (as Matthew 10:37 correctly interprets it).
- To **hate** one’s father and mother, one’s own life, means *to love your father and mother, your own life less than someone or something else*
 - One’s father and mother, one’s life does not receive priority but is relegated to second or third place.

Tower Builder & Warring King

Background - Tower

- “Tower” refers to a farm building used to store implements and produce, a step above a shed.
- Such a tower would:
 - Help safeguard his property from intruders and would-be thieves.
 - Increase the farmer’s property value and his status in the community.

Tower Builder & Warring King

Interpretation

- Both parables highlight the dangers of undertaking projects that are very costly (in terms of money or life) and the need for realistic forward planning.
- Discipleship is also a very costly project; followers of Jesus also must carefully consider the heavy cost:
 - Discipleship cannot be based on a momentary enthusiasm.
 - Discipleship requires a wholehearted, genuine commitment to Jesus.
 - Like the Tower builder and warring king, a would-be disciple must carefully count the costs and analyze the risks of following Jesus. He or she must readily renounce relationships and possessions if they interfere with following Jesus.

Tower Builder & Warring King

Application

- Warning:
 - Luke 14:27: “Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple”
 - Luke 9:62: “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God”
 - Old Saying: “The entry fee to Christianity is completely free, but the annual subscription is everything we’ve got.”
- Good News:
 - Matthew 11:28-30: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”