

THE BACKGROUND

Among the greatest and most profound of all biblical teachings are the parables of Jesus Christ. During His three-and-one-half-year ministry, Jesus expounded from thirty to fifty parables (depending on whose estimate you wish to accept). There are some very important reasons why Jesus used the parabolic method of teaching. For today's Christian there is much vital meaning contained within these rustic examples taken from everyday life in ancient Judaea and its environs. Here is a series of articles which will make that meaning come alive.

by Brian Knowles

SHOULD IT be surprising that Jesus used parables? Not if you understand something of the Jewish world in Christ's day. Says Alfred Edersheim: "Perhaps no other mode of teaching was so common among the Jews as that by Parables" (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972], p. 580).

The Jewish people were quite familiar with the parabolic method of teaching and had been for some time. In a footnote on the same page, Dr. Edersheim informs us: "... Every ancient Rabbinic work is literally full of parables."

The Old Testament itself contains many parables. The Prophet Ezekiel used at least four. A good example is found in Ezekiel 17:2: "Son of man, put forth a riddle, and speak a parable unto the house of Israel." The prophet then proceeds to unfold a strange story of a great eagle and a giant cedar tree. Later in the same chapter, he explains the meaning of this unusual story.

In II Samuel 12 the Prophet Nathan tactfully used a parable to convey a message from God to King David.

Isaiah 5:1-6 also contains a parable which was used as a song—again conveying an important message to the people by the parabolic method. Verse 7 explains the meaning.

What Is a Parable? In most cases a parable is a story drawn from everyday life. It is usually symbolic or metaphoric in nature—often conveying a profound spiritual lesson. Most parables use imagery to which the average person can readily relate. As the hearer comes into daily contact with the image or symbol (i.e., a field, a fig tree, etc.), he is easily reminded of the parable in which the associated imagery is used.

In order to gain the maximum value from Jesus' parables, we must, therefore, acquire at least a rudimentary understanding of the elements used in those stories. And we must gain an elementary understanding of the *geography* involved. This we will do as this series of articles unfolds.

Why Jesus Used Parables. There are several very good reasons why Christ chose to use the parabolic method of teaching.

The most obvious reason is that it was commonly accepted among the Jewish people of that day. When a teacher launched into a parable, most listeners were conditioned to respond and knew how to receive such teaching.

In addition, the colorful stories also served as effective devices by which the listener could remember the lesson. (Almost all parables were intended to convey a moral or spiritual lesson of one kind or another.)

But there is yet another reason which has escaped many commentators. Jesus clearly explained it in Matthew 13:10-11:

"And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because *it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.*"

What Jesus was saying was that *the people* were not really ready at that time to receive the profound truths of God's Kingdom—only the 12 disciples were. Therefore, He sometimes used parables without explaining them *to the people*. He did, however, privately interpret them to the disciples.

When the people heard the parable, it seemed like a simple "folksy" story of no particular spiritual significance. They heard and understood it only on a physical level. The spiritual meaning escaped them!

Jesus continued: "Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing *see not*; and hearing they *hear not*, neither do they understand" (verse 13).

Jesus knew that the general populace was not yet ready to receive the deeper truths of His way of life. Had He explained certain parables plainly, they would have been *accountable* for what they had

learned. As James later said: "Therefore to him that *knoweth* to do good, and doeth it not, *to him it is sin*" (James 4:17).

The truth of God is too precious to be thrown about indiscriminately! In Matthew 7:6 Jesus taught us an important principle: "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you."

He was not calling people "dogs" or "swine"; He was merely illustrating by analogy the *reaction* of some people to the truth of God. Many people, when exposed to the truth of God will treat it with contempt and persecute those who have explained that truth to them.

A Christian should, therefore,

use discretion in determining to whom he will explain the undiluted stronger truths of God.

Jesus sent His disciples on a preliminary evangelistic tour with this instruction: "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matt. 10:16).

And this is exactly what Jesus was doing in speaking to the people in *unexplained parables*. (A more detailed explanation of this important biblical principle is found in our reprint article entitled "Should You Try to Convert Others?" Write for your free copy.)

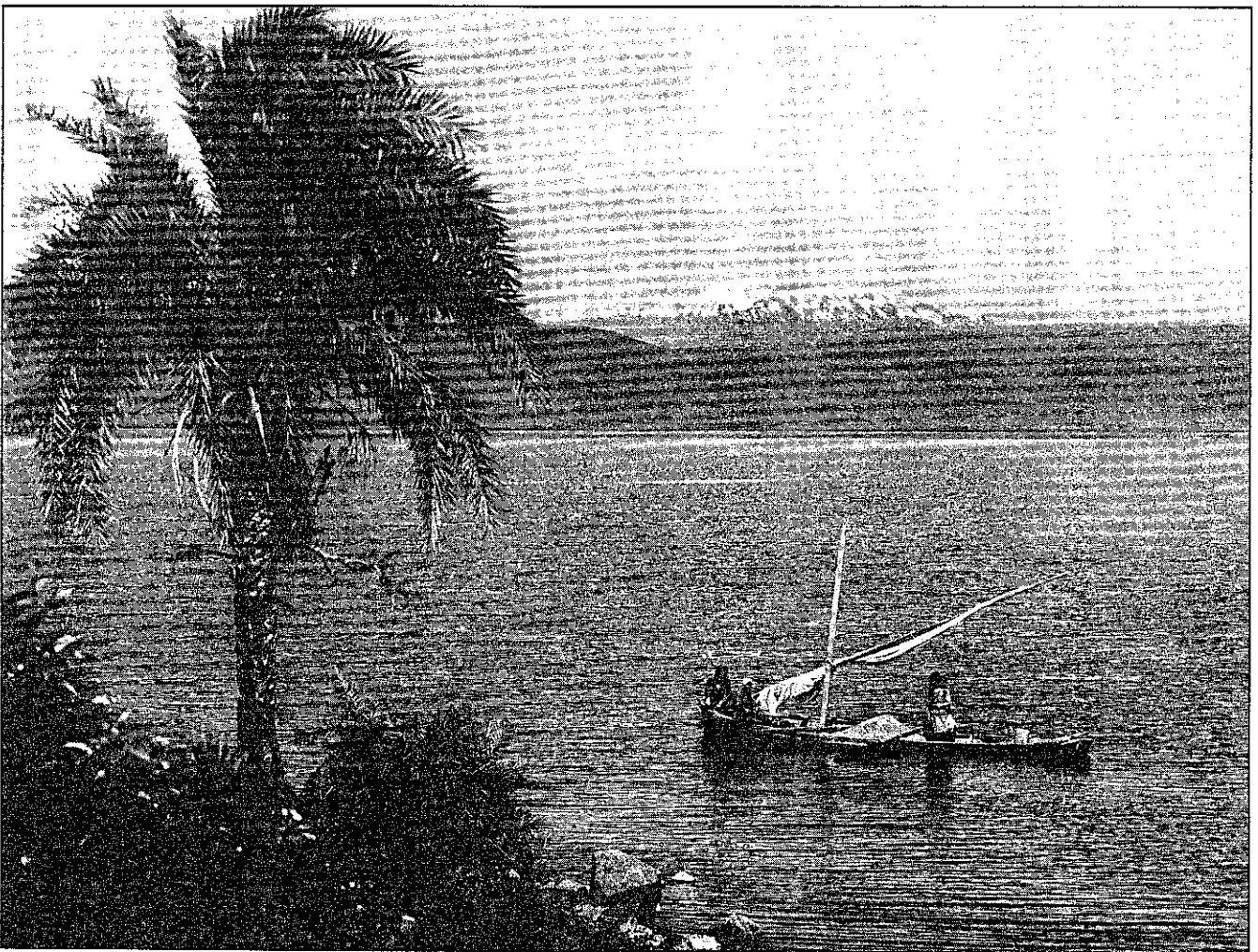
Some Parables Understood by Religious Leaders. Jesus always privately explained the intended spiritual meaning of each parable to His disciples. But there are *other*

instances in which the people to whom the parable was addressed also *knew* the intended spiritual meaning! It depended upon who was addressed and under what circumstances.

Not all parables were given to the masses of people who followed Jesus. Some were given *exclusively* to the disciples. Others were addressed directly to the religious leaders of the day—the scribes and Pharisees. And they *knew exactly* what Jesus meant, as we shall see as we progress into this series of articles.

The Grouping of the Parables. What many have not realized is that the parables were given in *three distinct* sets or groupings. Each set or group of parables had a theme or overall message. And each set became progressively

THE SEA OF GALILEE with Mount Hermon in the background. Jesus delivered His first set of parables on a boat just out from the shore on the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum.



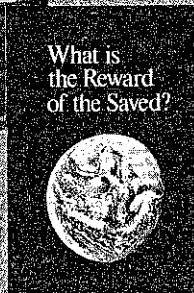
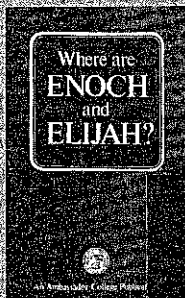
Melton Photo

100 YEARS FROM NOW

Where will you be?

Chances are that no one reading this is going to be a living, breathing human being 100 years from now. It's a bit unsettling, isn't it? Of course, we all know that human beings don't live forever. But thoughts of our own death, no matter how distant that event may seem, lead to thoughts about the "after life." Millions of people feel that for those who live a worthy life—for those who are "saved"—the afterlife is in heaven. Such beliefs are supposedly based on the Bible, but are in fact, nonbiblical. The Bible does have a great deal to say about an afterlife, but it's surprisingly different from traditional beliefs. If you'd like to read more about the true biblical teaching on this subject, write for these free booklets: *What Is the Reward of the Saved?* and *Where Are Enoch and Elijah?* Send your request to

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to you.



stronger in its meaning and impact.

Each group of parables was presented against a different geographical background and at three distinct points in Christ's ministry. Each set was provoked or stimulated by a different set of circumstances.

To really gain the most out of a study of the parables, one must examine them in their proper chronological sequence and historical context.

The Galilean Parables. Having grown up in Nazareth, Jesus later moved to the town of Capernaum near the Sea (or lake) of Galilee where he may have owned a home. It was in the province of Galilee that He worked as a carpenter following in the footsteps of His father Joseph.

This provides the setting for the first group of parables, which may be called the "Galilean Parables." This set of parables was given early in Jesus' ministry.

"The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side [Sea of Galilee]. And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. And he spake many things unto them in parables . . ." (Matt. 13:1-3).

Here we have the setting: Jesus was sitting in a small boat (probably a fishing vessel) near the shore of the freshwater lake of Galilee. A large crowd was standing on the gently sloping hillside, which blended into the calm and beautiful lake.

This setting provided a natural amphitheater. The boat functioned as a speaker's platform or stage; and His voice was carried across and reflected by the water to the shore, where the people were standing. The sloped sides of the lakeshore provided a natural acoustical "backdrop" for the audience. In short, the speaking conditions as found in nature were as nearly ideal as possible in the days before electronic amplification.

Six Parables to the People. This first set consisted of a total of ten parables. The first six of these are addressed *to the people*. The re-

maining four were *exclusively for the disciples*.

Remember, the account of Jesus' ministry is given in *four* different biographical books, called "Gospels."

To gain a truly comprehensive picture of all of Jesus' parables, each of these accounts must be carefully compared. The first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) are called "Synoptics." That is, they are all thought to have basically originated from a common source perhaps the Gospel of Mark.

Each writer wrote from a somewhat different point of view. The Apostle John apparently wrote much later and did not see the need to include much of the material written in the first three books.

For an accurate picture of this first grouping of parables, it is best to compare Matthew 13, Mark 4 and Luke 8. In so doing, you will notice that Mark includes two parables in this first set which are not found in Matthew 13.

The list of parables in the first set is as follows:

- 1) *The Parable of the Sower* (Matt. 13:3-9)
- 2) *The Wheat and the Tares* (Matt. 13:24-30)
- 3) *The Lamp Under the Bushel* (Mark 4:21-25)
- 4) *The Grain of Mustard Seed* (Matt. 13:31-32)
- 5) *The Kingdom Like Leaven* (Matt. 13:33)
- 6) *The Seed Cast Into the Ground* (Mark 4:26-29)

This represents the set of six parables given *to the people*.

"All these things spake Jesus *unto the multitude* in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto *them*: That it might be fulfilled

Recommended Reading

How does one become a citizen of the Kingdom of God? What *is* the Kingdom of God? Is it the Church? Where will it be? How will it be set up? What will Christians do in the Kingdom of God? These basic questions are answered in the booklet *Just What Do You Mean . . . Kingdom of God?* To obtain your free copy simply request it by title. Write to the address of our office nearest you).

which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 13:34-35).

The "prophet" spoken of is Asaph, a Levite and the leader of the singers in ancient Israel. He had written many centuries earlier: "I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old" (Ps. 78:2). So Jesus was actually *fulfilling prophecy* when He spoke these parables.

The first group of six parables was not explained to the people at that time. But Jesus, in private, did *personally* explain each one to the disciples at a later time.

"Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the house: and his

disciples came unto him, saying, *Declare unto us the parable of the tares of the field*" (Matt. 13:36). (He had already explained the parable of the sower to them—verse 18).

The Remaining Four Parables.

After explaining the parable of the wheat and the tares to the disciples, Jesus also gave them four additional parables. In each case the explanation was self-evident. These last four parables in this first set were *not given to the people in general*. They may be listed as follows:

7) *The Hidden Treasure* (Matt. 13:44)

8) *The Merchant Seeking Pearls* (Matt. 13:45, 46)

9) *The Net Cast Into the Sea* (Matt. 13:47-50)

10) *The Householder and His Treasure* (Matt. 13:52)

These parables were given as lessons *to the disciples* in particular. Jesus did *not* obscure the meaning in any way. Rather, He illustrated some very important moral and spiritual lessons which were aimed directly at the disciples.

The Theme of the First Set. A common theme runs throughout these ten parables, whether they be addressed to the general public or to the disciples. They all refer to the *Kingdom of God*. Each parable is designed to motivate those who understand to really *want* and *desire* the Kingdom. They show how the Kingdom will grow, flourish and ultimately dominate the entire world. They demonstrate the need to seek God's coming Kingdom with every fiber of our beings. □

The Parables of Jesus

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

In the preceding article we learned just what parables are and why Jesus used them. We also saw that there are three distinct sets or grouping of parables, each having a different theme. This article examines the first six parables of the first set.

AS JESUS sat in a small fishing craft just offshore on the Sea (or lake) of Galilee, He began to address the large crowd assembled on the shore. He spoke to them in parables about the Kingdom of God.

In this first group of parables, Jesus gave to the people six parables without any explanation. Later, He privately explained the meaning of all these to His own disciples. He also gave the four disciples additional parables which were self-explanatory. These last four parables contained a special message within the overall theme pertaining directly to the disciples' future apostolic ministry.

The Parables Contained Doctrine. It is important to realize that the parables were *doctrinal* in nature: "And he taught them many things by parables, and said unto them in his *doctrine* . . ." (Mark 4:2).

A "doctrine" is a biblical principle, teaching, or truth which is accepted as authoritative. It constitutes part of the dogma of real Christianity. Therefore, we cannot underestimate the importance of seeking understanding of the parables of Jesus!

The first parable Jesus gave is of special significance because it is a pacesetter of sorts. It is typical of all such parables, and the method of ex-

planation also follows the same basic pattern.

Speaking of the first parable in this group (that of the sower), Jesus said to His disciples: "... Know ye not this parable? and *how then will ye know all parables?*" (Mark 4:13.)

The Parable of the Sower.

"**Hearken: Behold, there went out a sower to sow: And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up. And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth: and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: But when the sun was up, it was scorched: and because it had no root, it withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the**

thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased: and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred."

Mark 4:3-8

This first parable is a simple story liberally laced with local color. It is found in three of the four Gospel accounts—Matthew, Mark and Luke. Each Gospel mentions a point or two not found in the other accounts. We will use Mark's more concise Gospel as our basic reference.

Jesus describes a scene very familiar to His audience: A sower went out to sow grain in his field. The seed falls on four different types of ground: 1) the wayside, 2) stony ground, 3) among thorns, and 4) good ground. Each represents a different category of person who hears the Word of God at some point in his life. Each responds differently.

We are not told who the sower is, but it is explained that "the sower soweth *the word*" (verse 14). We must assume that whoever disseminates God's Word (God or one of His human instruments) is the sower. The seed in the parable, then, represents the gospel message and all that it includes.

Each person who hears it reacts differently. Not everyone responds with equal enthusiasm. Nor does the Word of God bear the same fruit in each individual it touches.

Those by the Wayside. The people in this first category hear the gospel message, but they are immediately dissuaded from *doing* anything about it. God's truth is never allowed to take root in their lives. They are easy prey for the devil, who subtly convinces them to disbelieve what they hear. "*Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts*" (verse 15).

There are many ways by which this happens: A snide remark about the message from a "friend" who is supposedly "in the know" about such things. A sudden change of personal circumstances may lead to a "temporary" diversion—which becomes permanent. A minor disagreement about a small point can lead the prospective Christian to "throw out the baby with the bath water." It could be any number of things, but the result is always the same! The person rejects

the gospel of the Kingdom of God before it gets a chance to take root.

On Stony Ground. Persons in this particular grouping advance somewhat further than those in the first category. Their initial reaction to the Word of God is enthusiastic. They are happy to hear the truth preached. They welcome it and may even become baptized. "Then they that *gladly* received his word were baptized . . ." (Acts 2:41).

But unfortunately, their enthusiasm soon wears thin. They "have no root in themselves, and so *endure but for a time*: afterward, when *affliction* or *persecution* ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended" (Mark 4:17).

These "babes in Christ" never allow their spiritual roots to go down quite deeply enough to draw on the pure, nourishing water of God's spiritual power (John 7:38, 39; Acts 1:8). When persecution comes along, they are not strong enough to withstand it. They have no persevering power in the face of the ridicule and derision of those who do not share their beliefs.

Such people are only willing to obey God as long as it does not cost them anything in terms of personal prestige and respect. Loss of face means loss of everything to them. They are willing to compromise the Word of God rather than suffer for it.

Did not Jesus say in another place: ". . . If any man will come after me, let him . . . take up his cross, and follow me"? (Matt. 16:24.)

Among Thorns. The third type of person in this parable progresses somewhat further. He too begins to bear fruit and live a life of obedience to Christ. His life changes as he yields to the Word of God. But he too has a "hang-up." At some point in his Christian life, "the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it *becometh unfruitful*" (Mark 4:19).

In order to become unfruitful, he must have at one time *been* fruitful. Here is someone who has actually begun to bear substantial fruit as a result of God's Word. He has made spiritual progress. He may have been in the Church for some time. Others

may even consider him well established in the body of Christ.

But sooner or later, plain old *materialism* or sensuality creeps in and smothers his spirituality.

Perhaps it is a craving for material success in the world of business or industry. A desire to be at the top of the financial heap can divert a person's focus of attention from spiritual to material things.

For this reason, the Apostle Paul warned the Colossians about drifting into materialism: "Set your affection on things above, *not* on things on the earth" (Col. 3:2). He also said that "to be carnally [physically] minded is death . . ." (Rom. 8:6).

There are many pitfalls which can tear a person away from the abundant life to which God has called him. It could be money, the desire for financial success, another woman or man, a job, or an inordinate desire of any kind. It could be a craving for liquor or food (not that eating and drinking are wrong, but drunkenness and gluttony are) or possibly even narcotic drugs.

Whatever it is, it diverts one from his life in Christ—choking out the influence of God's Holy Spirit and stifling any further bearing of good fruit.

On Good Ground. This category describes people who are converted and who make continual growth and progress in the faith. They bear the good fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

But not all bear the same amount of fruit. Some are much more productive than others. Many do not realize their maximum potential as Christians—they merely get by with a modicum of effort.

Yet it is Christ's will that we bear *much* fruit. Those who are *closest* to Jesus Christ bear the most fruit. Jesus said: "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, that same bringeth forth *much fruit*: for without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Which category are *you* in?

Summation of First Parable. In briefest summary, this first parable is a simple, earthy story drawn from daily life in Galilee. While the audience did not understand its meaning at the time it was given, Jesus later privately explained it to His disciples. It can *now* be understood by

anyone to whom God wishes to reveal its meaning. The story is *timeless* in its application.

It applies to four types of people who hear the Word of God. All respond differently. The fourth group bears fruit until the day they enter into the Kingdom of God at Christ's return. A simple, yet profound, message concerning the Kingdom!

The Wheat and the Tares.

"Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him. Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them. An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him. Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay: lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them but gather the wheat into my barn.

Matthew 13:24-30

The second parable is also taken from a description of typical rural life in the province of Galilee. Any farmer of the day would have known about tares (darnel). They were weeds which grew with the wheat and looked very much like it as long as the wheat remained in the blade stage. When they grew to maturity, however, they were readily distinguishable.

This is a simple illustration pointing out the fact that both the converted and unconverted have to coexist in the same society until the time of the great harvest of lives at Christ's return. During that time Jesus Christ will make a separation between those who are His and those who are not.

The best account of this parable is found in Matthew 13:24-30. (The explanation is given in verses 36-43.) Each element of the parable has vital meaning. Notice Matthew's explanation:

"The field is the world; the good seed [true Christians] are the children of the kingdom; but the tares

**GET WISDOM
GET UNDERSTANDING**
Prov. 4:5

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are the children of the wicked one [Satan—compare John 8:44, I John 3:8]; the enemy that sowed them is the devil [the god of this society, II Cor. 4:4]; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world [Greek: *aiónos*, meaning “age”].”

This parable graphically shows the fate of those who insist on following the devil when *they know better!* Those who are incorrigibly wicked will be thrown into a lake of fire—and be *burned* into ashes (Mal. 4:3).

John spoke of this in the book of Revelation: “And death [the dead] and hell [the grave—hades] were cast into the lake of fire. This is the *second death*. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:14-15). In order to die twice, one must first *live* twice (James Bond notwithstanding). This means a *resurrection* must occur.

This is not immortal life as a

“soul” in an ever-burning hellfire—it is complete extinction and oblivion *forever!* And this is *doctrine!* (If you have never proved that the concepts of an immortal soul and an ever-burning hellfire constitute *false* doctrines, then please write for *Is There a Real Hell Fire?* and “What Is Man?”)

The Lamp Under a Bushel.

“And he said unto them, Is a candle brought to be put under a bushel, or under a bed? and not to be set on a candlestick? For there is nothing hid, which shall not be manifested: neither was any thing kept secret, but that it should come abroad. If any man have ears to hear, let him hear.”

Mark 4:21-23

This parable had an especially significant meaning for the disciples. Jesus had told them earlier: “Fear them [the people] not therefore: for there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known. *What I tell you* in darkness, that *speak ye* in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that *preach ye upon the housetops*” (Matt. 10:26-27).

The gospel message is the light

that shines in a dark place. Christ was the Light of the world (John 1:9). Christians are to light the world with their example and with their *message* (Matt. 5:14-16). It is the *work* and the *duty* of God’s Church to proclaim the mysteries of the Kingdom of God to all the world.

Christ illustrated this important point by showing that if a person bought a candle it would be ridiculous to hide it (or snuff out its light) beneath a bushel basket! So it is with the message of the Kingdom. It is not something for a Christian to clutch to his breast as a personal talisman; it is not his alone to have and to keep.

It is a message that must be proclaimed. As Paul said, “. . . Woe is unto me, *if I preach not* the gospel!” (I Cor. 9:16.)

God has revealed to His people truths that were kept secret from the beginning of time. Even the mighty prophets of old were not granted the same insight into the plan of salvation that lay members of God’s Church may have today.

Even *angels* desire to look into some of the things we may readily know (I Pet. 1:10-12). “But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But *God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit*: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God” (I Cor. 2:9, 10).

Can we hide such truth and light under a “bushel”?

God forbid!

The Grain of Mustard Seed.

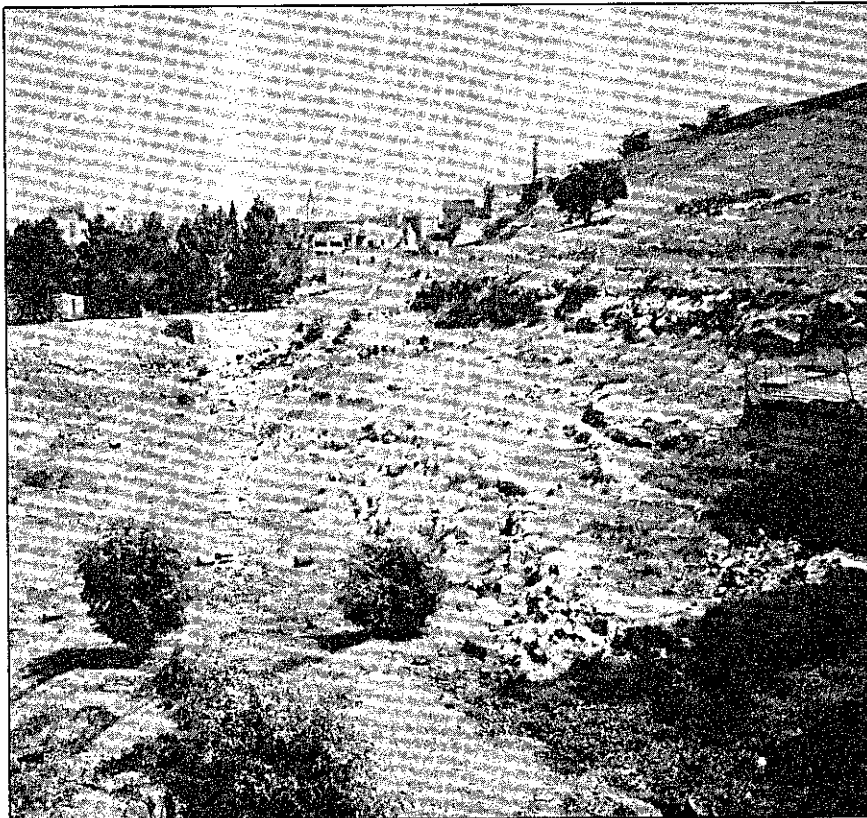
“Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.”

Matthew 13:31, 32

Again, we use Matthew’s account. This parable shows that the preparation for the Kingdom of God has the smallest of beginnings. Yet that ruling Kingdom will ultimately fill *all* the earth.

Daniel wrote: “And there was given him [Christ] dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve

NEAR THE BOTTOM OF THE VALLEY OF HINNOM, outside Jerusalem. Fires burning in this valley in New Testament times represented the final punishment which will burn the wicked to ashes.



Plain Truth

him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed" (Dan. 7:14).

The saints will inherit this Kingdom with Christ. "But the saints of the most High shall take the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever, even for ever and ever" (verse 18).

What a magnificent destiny! What incredible glory! This is the marvelous future of all true Christians—to inherit *all* things as a part of the universe-filling Kingdom of God.

But look how small it all began! In all of Old Testament times, only a comparative handful of people were called to inherit the Kingdom of God. Men Like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Noah, Daniel and David. Women like Esther, Rahab, Sarah and others. (Those who have never been called *will* have their first chance for salvation *later*—by a resurrection from the dead. For a full explanation write for our free article "Is This the Only Day of Salvation?")

It was not until shortly after the death and resurrection of Christ that substantial numbers of people were called to the Kingdom of God.

On the day of Pentecost, A.D. 31, three thousand people were added to the Church; and from then on it grew or contracted in varying degrees throughout the centuries (Acts 2:41-47).

At this present time, God is adding to the Body of Christ those who are being called to eternal life. By the return of Jesus Christ, thousands upon thousands shall have been added to that ever-growing multitude. It will then constitute the ruling family Kingdom of God. Eventually, all Israel and every human being who has ever lived will have had an opportunity for salvation. God is not willing that *any* should perish (II Pet. 3:9).

Think of all the *billions* of people who have ever lived and realize that most of them will ultimately be added to the Kingdom of God. When it's all said and done, that Kingdom will finally *fill the earth!*

How appropriate is the parable of the tiny mustard seed which grows into a large shrub or bush in which the birds of heaven find shelter. That tiny seed produces a plant many

thousands of times its own size—and so it will be with the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom Like Leaven.

"Another parable spake he unto them: The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened."

Matthew 13:33

The fifth parable illustrates essentially the same point as the previous one, but by a different analogy. The entire parable is contained in Matthew 13:33.

Leaven is the substance used to make bread dough rise by expansion. Most homemakers will be familiar with its qualities. Even those who have not used yeast, have at least made cakes, biscuits, pancakes, or a similar product with baking powder, which is also a type of leaven. A *little* leaven is all that is necessary to leaven the whole lump of dough (Gal. 5:9).

So it is with the Kingdom of God. What God has started with a comparative few at this time will ultimately result in the entire earth being blanketed with the knowledge of God. "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain [nation]: for the earth shall be *full* of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9).

The Seed Growing of Itself.

"And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground: and should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself: first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come."

Mark 4:26-29

We do not understand the precise mechanism by which the Word of God produces fruit in human lives. But we certainly can plainly see that it *does!*

God's ministers are very much like those who plant seed and then care for it while it comes to fruition. Paul made such an analogy when he referred to himself and Apollos: "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase" (I Cor. 3:6-7).

God causes each member of the

Church to grow in grace, in knowledge and in character. This growth is brought about by God's Holy Spirit working in each individual life—not by the minister (husbandman). It is also *God* who adds to the Church as a whole (compare John 6:44 and Acts 2:47). *He* increases it quantitatively as well as qualitatively.

Those who are called in this age are the "firstfruits" of that great harvest of lives (James 1:18). And it is God who will reap His own harvest in the end of this age of growth.

Summary. This completes the first six parables which were given to the people without explanation. Later they were *all* explained to the disciples: "... And when they were *alone*, he expounded *all* things to his disciples" (Mark 4:34).

The predominant theme of these particular parables is plainly the *Kingdom of God.*

By these parables Jesus showed that most people who are called pass through several stages. Those who endure to the end—continuing to bear the good fruit of God's Spirit—will ultimately achieve salvation and glory for all eternity.

The rest will be cast into a lake of fire, which represents their second—and final—death. But the righteous and the sinner will have to live side by side in this society like the grain and the weeds—that is, until the final harvest of souls at the end of the world. Then Christ's angelic servants will make a separation.

Also, it is God who gives the growth in His Church—both numerically and spiritually. And the example of the lamp under the bushel teaches us that the Church of God *must* preach the gospel of the Kingdom as a beacon of light shining in a world of darkness.

In addition, we have learned that what God is starting so small in us *now* will eventually fill the entire earth! The Kingdom will grow and flourish to become millions of times its starting size.

What profound truths these simple parables contain! What glory is revealed in them!

In the next installment we will analyze and examine the remaining four parables in this first Galilean grouping—those given only to the disciples.

The Parables of Jesus

FOR DISCIPLES ONLY

The theme for this group of ten parables is the Kingdom of God. In the preceding article we covered the first six parables, which were given to the people but explained only to the disciples. Now we examine the remaining four parables — all of which deal with important doctrinal points concerning the Kingdom.

JESUS had addressed the first six parables in this series directly to the people who were standing on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. But because of their spiritual blindness He did not explain the meaning to them. It was only to the disciples that He later revealed the meaning.

"All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them" (Matt. 13:34). The people—at the time—never really realized what they had been told! Actually Christ had given them precious information that had been kept secret since the world was formed—but it was *hidden* in the parables (verse 35).

"Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the house: and his disciples came unto him . . ." (Matt. 13:36).

Now the setting had changed. Jesus was no longer sitting in the boat on the Sea of Galilee. He was in a house (His own or perhaps Peter's). The disciples asked for an explanation of the parable of the tares (verse 36). Jesus explained not only that parable but all the parables He had given to the people (Mark 4:34).

Following the explanation of the parables given to the people, Jesus then *added* four more parables which pertained directly to the work of the future apostles. These were not given to the people at that time, but to the disciples only. The meaning was not hidden—there was no need. In fact, the meaning of each of these four last parables is self-explanatory.

Jesus continued with the same theme—that of the Kingdom of God—but He spoke of things which

had to do with the ministry of the apostles. The disciples were still *not converted* at this point. They were not yet fully resolved to carry out their apostolic commissions. You will recall that following Christ's crucifixion Peter had said: "I go a fishing . . ." (John 21:3). And following Peter's example, the others said the same thing. But Christ had intended that they should become fishers of *men!*

These four parables were designed to show the disciples the incredible value and pricelessness of their apostolic calling. They were intended to illustrate the true worth of the knowledge of the Kingdom of God. And the last of these parables indicated how they were to preach and teach others about the Kingdom of God.

Let's examine them one at a time.

The Hidden Treasure.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hid in a field: the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field."

Matt. 13:44

Here we see a person who stumbles unexpectedly upon a valuable treasure in a field through which he is passing. He is not seeking it. He just happens upon it. But in so doing he immediately recognizes its tremendous value and takes steps to acquire the field—even at the cost of selling all his earthly possessions.

We may learn *two* lessons from this brief parable. One: not everyone who is called is *seeking* the truth of God. Most are just going about their lives oblivious to the need to search for life's meaning. Their whole goal

in life is self-perpetuation and perhaps material success. Then, quite unexpectedly, God intervenes in their lives and calls them to His Kingdom (John 6:44).

The second lesson: a wise person will immediately recognize the value and meaning of that high calling. He will take steps to see that from that time forth nothing jeopardizes his efforts to pursue eternal life. He will abandon his material goals and "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matt. 6:33).

He will not care what the cost is—although he should soberly count that cost before he sets about becoming a real Christian: "For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? . . . So likewise, *whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple*" (Luke 14:28, 33).

Jesus was pointing the disciples to the importance of their calling as apostles. But the principle applies to all who are called of God to His Kingdom.

What are *you* willing to give up to achieve salvation?

The Pearl of Great Price.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it."

Matt. 13:45-46

Notice the difference between this and the previous parable. The merchant was *seeking* "goodly pearls." Since the pearl of great price represents the Kingdom, we must conclude that describes a person searching for spiritual truth.

There are many such people in the world. Not everyone stumbles upon the truth; some are actually seeking knowledge of God and His Kingdom.

Consider the moving example of a man named Simeon: "And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, *waiting for the consolation of Israel*, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Spirit, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation" (Luke 2:25-30).

Simeon had *yearned* for God's Kingdom and His Christ! And God rewarded him by allowing him to see the Messiah before his death—and indeed to prophesy concerning Him!

God has not yet given us the privilege of seeing Christ as did Simeon. But we have been offered that pearl of great price—we know of the Kingdom of God and how to achieve salvation.

If we are patient and endure to the very end—if we have really been willing to forsake everything and have given God's Kingdom top priority in our lives—we too will someday gaze upon the face of the living Christ, this time in all its brilliance and glory as the returning Creator God.

Notice what the scripture says: "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, *we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is*" (1 John 3:2).

Whether you were searching for the truth of God or not—will you now recognize *the value* of what you have within your grasp?

The Net Cast into the Sea.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good

into vessels, but cast the bad away. So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth." **Matt. 13:47-50**

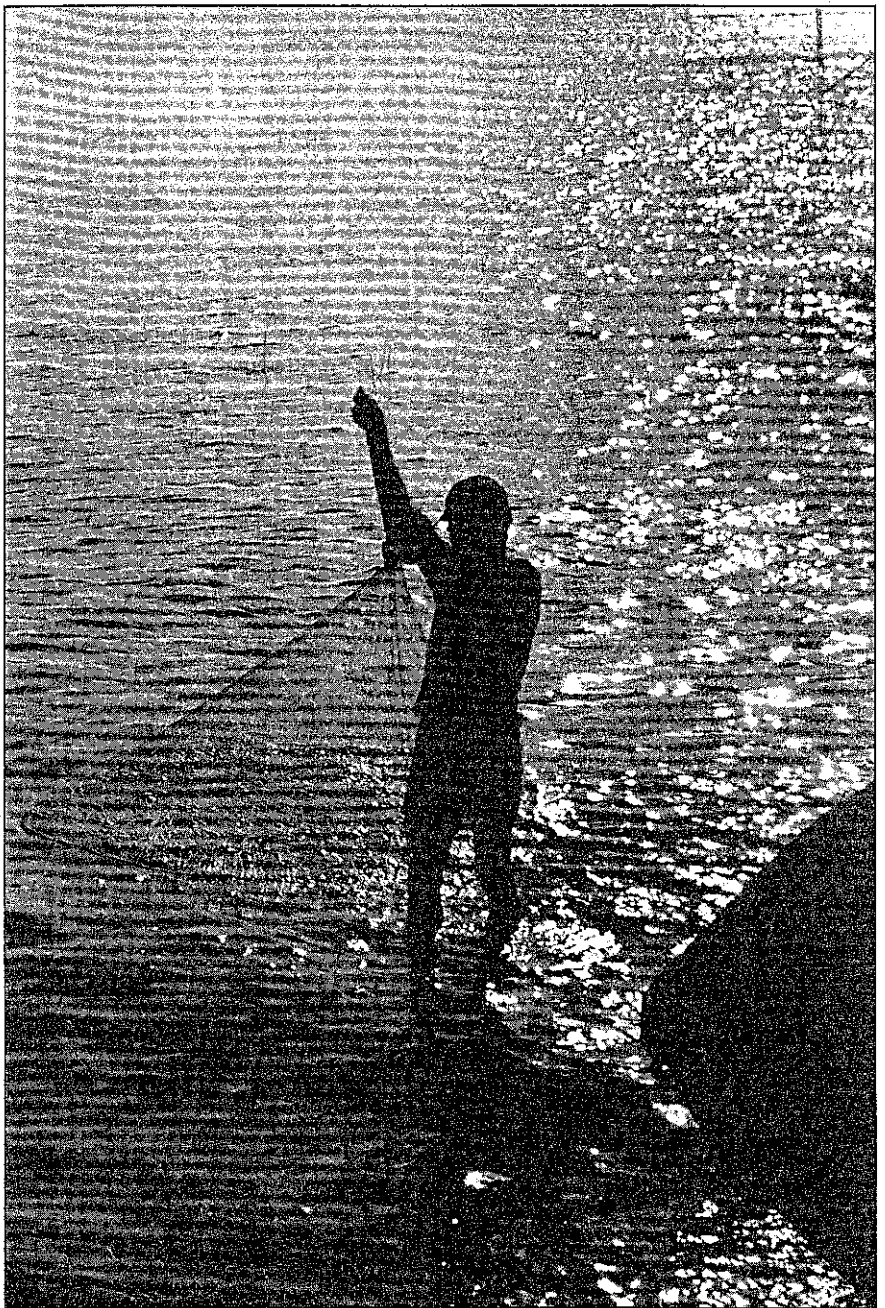
As Peter and the others went out as "fishers of men," there was no guarantee that every person they caught would be of top spiritual quality. The gospel message attracts all kinds of people. Not everyone is truly converted and headed for the Kingdom. Simon Magus, in Acts the eighth chapter, is a good example of

a person who was attracted by the power of the apostles (he was even baptized), but his motives were wrong.

There are those who fellowship with true brethren of the body of Christ. They eat with them, attend services with them, and pay lip service to righteousness—but they are *not* children of the Kingdom!

Jude spoke of such as "spots in your feasts of charity, *when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear...*" (Jude 12). Such

AS IN ANCIENT TIMES, a fisherman casts a net into the Sea of Galilee.



P. Gross

people do not truly have the fear and respect of God which a genuinely converted person must have. They appear as Christians and teachers outwardly, but inwardly they are hypocrites and spiritually unclean.

Peter also warned of such individuals. He wrote: "But there were false prophets also *among the people*, even as there shall be false teachers *among you*, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction" (II Peter 2:1).

These are not outsiders—they are insiders among the people of the Church of God. They are caught in the "net" along with those who are headed for the Kingdom of God. But at the return of Christ, such people will be separated—God's angels will "sever the wicked *from among the just*."

Upon completion of this parable Jesus asked them, "Have ye understood all these things?" They answered in the affirmative (Matt.

13:51). He then gave them one last parable which could only apply to the ministry of Christ.

The Householder's Treasure.

"Then said he unto them, Therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old."

Matt. 13:52

Here was an obvious reference to the disciples, who had been "instructed unto the kingdom of heaven" by the previous parables! They had learned some entirely new things—as Jesus had said in verse 35: "That it might be fulfilled . . . I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world."

But they also would preach some "old" things—things from the Old Testament prophets and writers, as well as the new truths which Christ had personally given to them.

The Jewish people to whom the apostles preached were familiar with

many of the Old Testament teachings used by the apostles in the preaching of the gospel. In addition, they heard many new truths which were given directly to the disciples by Christ.

The complete message of the New Testament combines the words and lessons of the Old Testament with the revelation of Jesus Christ. Therefore some things are new and some are old. This is amply demonstrated by the fact that the New Testament writers included some 850 references to the Old Testament in their writings—280 of which are direct quotes!

This completes the first set of Galilean parables. "And it came to pass, that when Jesus had finished these parables, he departed thence" (Matt. 13:53).

In the next article we will examine a parable from Christ's "later Judean ministry," which deals with a somewhat different theme and was given under an entirely new set of circumstances.

The Parables of Jesus

"WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?"

AFTER THE great Galilean ministry, Jesus began to travel outside the province. His journeyings to preach the gospel took Him to the north to Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:13), and then back to Galilee again. Later he went south to Judea and Jerusalem (John 7 and 8). This period is generally called the "later Judean ministry" by commentators. At some point during this Judean period, Jesus gave the parable of the good Samaritan.

If you have studied a little of the history of Israel, you will recall that the northern ten tribes of the House of Israel were taken captive by the Assyrians in the years 721-718 B.C. The bulk of the House of Judah (with parts of Benjamin and Levi) did not go into captivity until the Babylo-

nians conquered them in the year 585.

After the northern House of Israel had been carried away, the Assyrians replaced them with Gentile peoples from five cities of the area of Babylon: "And the king of Assyria brought men from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Ava, and from Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel: and they possessed Samaria, and dwelt in the cities thereof" (II Kings 17:24).

These Gentile peoples still populated Samaria in Jesus' day. They were called *Samaritans*. They adopted many of the religious customs of the Jews and even claimed to be descended from Joseph—when it

was expedient to do so (see Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 11:8,6).

A spirit of antagonism developed between Jews and Samaritans. This spirit is reflected in John's account of Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan woman whom He met at Jacob's well. She said to Jesus: "How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans" (John 4:9). Obviously there was little or no social contact between the two groups.

With this understanding, we may now look at the parable of the good Samaritan.

The subject in question here is "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25.) The question had been asked by a lawyer—a man

expert in Mosaic law. But the lawyer had no practical interest in the question. To him it was a theoretical test question—he was, in a sense, baiting Jesus. He was testing His theology.

Law Divided into Two Parts. Jesus knew the man was familiar with the Scriptures, so He responded by asking the lawyer a common rabbinic question: "What is written in the law? how readest thou?" (Verse 26).

The lawyer then paraphrased from the Torah or Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible, commonly called "the Law." He said: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself." This was somewhat loosely quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

This simple statement summed up the entire Law, which was divided into two parts: 1) love toward God, and 2) love of neighbor.

Jesus confirmed that the lawyer had indeed answered correctly.

But the man wanted to vindicate his own stand, which obviously did not square with the latter aspect of the commandment. He tried to imply that the answer was not as simple as Jesus had indicated. He then presented a technicality: "But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbor?" (Verse 29.)

This was the crux of the whole situation. To the religious Jew of that day, this was a crucial technicality. What if one had to deal with a Gentile, a Samaritan, a publican, or a sinner? There were many classes of people with whom devout Jews would have no dealings.

But Jesus trapped the lawyer at his own game. He then launched into the now-famous parable of the good Samaritan.

The Good Samaritan. Christ described the story of a man (most likely a Jewish merchant) traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. Possibly he had sold some goods there and was now returning home with the money. The journey from Jerusalem to Jericho was a lonely, dangerous twenty-one miles of desert road. Bandits frequented the route hoping to rob those traveling alone.

The man was attacked by thieves, who even took his clothing. Left badly beaten by the side of the road, the man was half dead and urgently in need of help (verse 30).

By coincidence a Jewish priest came by where the man lay. He would have been familiar with the law quoted earlier, but perhaps he justified himself with the same technical question: "Who is my neighbor?"

Rather than stopping to help the wounded man, the priest merely looked and then quickly passed by on the other side. He didn't want to "get involved."

Shortly after, a Levite came by, stopped, looked at the suffering robbery victim, and also passed by on the other side. Neither of these Jewish religious leaders wanted to take the time and effort to assist the injured man.

But then a Gentile Samaritan came along. When he saw the injured traveler he was immediately moved with compassion for the man. He rendered assistance by disinfecting the man's wounds with wine, keeping them moist with olive oil, and binding them up with bandages. The Samaritan then put the man on his own beast and took him to an inn for much needed rest and recuperation.

The particular type of "inn" being referred to here did not charge for lodging, only for food and sometimes entertainment. The Samaritan gave the host enough money (two pence—about two days' labor—compare Matthew 20:2) to pay for the victim's food until he himself returned. He left strict instructions that the injured man was to be properly cared for in the meantime. Should the amount exceed what the Samaritan had given the innkeeper, he promised to make up the difference upon his return.

This was a shining example of compassion on a fellow human being. The Samaritan certainly went "above and beyond" in caring for the man. He did *more* than would normally be expected.

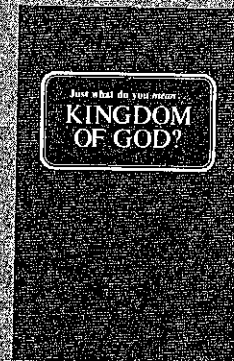
With this indicting example burning in the mind of the lawyer, Jesus then asked the penetrating question: "Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that

THE KINGDOM OF GOD-

What does it mean to you?

Kingdom *n.* A politically organized community or major territorial unit having a monarchical form of government headed by a king or queen.

The phrase "kingdom of God," which appears frequently in the Bible, is often heard in religious circles. It is generally assumed to be a reference to heaven or to a condition of mind held by believers. Almost no one would apply the standard dictionary definition of "kingdom"—a type of government over a specific territory. Yet that is precisely how the term is most often used in the Bible. The real meaning of the term "kingdom of God" is far more interesting and exciting than the traditional vague concepts. The booklet *Just What Do You Mean—Kingdom of God?* clearly explains what the Kingdom of God is and why it's important to you. For a free copy, write to the address of our office nearest you. (See last page for addresses worldwide.)



fell among the thieves?" (Verse 36).

What could the lawyer say? The priest and the Levite had rendered no assistance whatsoever. Only the Samaritan had shown any concern—and then he had gone overboard to help the man. But even at that the lawyer still didn't want to say the word "Samaritan"! He merely replied: "... He that shewed mercy on him ... " (verse 37).

The lawyer was now completely cornered. He had no comeback, no legal technicality to fall back upon. And while he was in that position, Jesus administered the coup de grace: "GO, AND DO THOU LIKEWISE!"

What This Parable Should Mean to You. This parable is not merely a quaint and interesting story of a first

century "put down." It conveys one of the most important lessons of Christianity. It is axiomatic to real Christianity that the true Christian must be compassionate and impartial in rendering assistance when it is needed.

Paul said: "*As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith*" (Gal. 6:10). And: "See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to *all men*" (I Thess. 5:15).

God is no respecter of persons. He is not partial to one race or the other when it comes to showing compassion, hearing prayers and rendering help. God inspired Paul to write: "There is neither Jew [typical Israel-

ite] not Greek [typical Gentile], there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for *ye are all one* in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

With God there is no racial prejudice, no status or social caste system, no "male" chauvinism. All people of all races, sexes and social levels may be Christians. And it is the duty of all Christians to help all people who need help, whenever they have the opportunity to do so.

The meaning of the parable of the good Samaritan may be summed up by simply quoting a single proverb: "Withhold not good from them to whom it is due [your neighbor!], when it is in the power of thine hand to do it" (Prov. 3:27).

In short, a *true Christian* gets involved! □