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Lecture Notes on the Gospel Parables

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Lecture Notes on the Gospel Parables

by
Scott Gambrill Sinclair

Comparing Three Versions of the Parable of the Great Supper; Some Implications

Matthew 22:1-14: And in response Jesus spoke again to them in parables. "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son. And he sent out his slaves to summon those who had been invited to the marriage feast, and they were not willing to come. Again he sent out other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who were invited, "Look, I have prepared my meal; my bulls and fattened cattle have been slaughtered, and all is ready. Come to the marriage feast."' But they went away unconcerned, one to his own field, and one to his business, and the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was angered, and sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, 'The marriage feast is ready, but those who were invited were not deserving. So, go into the crossroads and invite to the marriage feast whomever you find.' And those slaves went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good, and the wedding hall feast was filled with guests. But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a person who had not put on a wedding garment. And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here when you do not have on a wedding garment?' And he was silenced. Then the king said to the servants, 'Tie up his feet and hands and throw him out into the farthest darkness.' There there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, for there are many who are called, but few who are chosen."

Luke 14:15-24: And when one of those who were also dining heard these things, he said to him [Jesus], "Blessed is whoever will eat bread in God's kingdom!" But he [Jesus] said to him, "A certain person gave a great dinner and invited many. And he sent out his slave at the dinner hour to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, because it is now ready.' And they all started, each one, to make an excuse for themselves. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I have the necessity to go out to see it. I ask you, have me excused.' And another said, 'I bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to test them. I ask you, have me excused.' And another said, 'I married a woman, and because of this, I cannot come.' And the slave came and reported back these things to his master. Then the head of the house, being angry, said to his slave, 'Go out quickly into the avenues and alleys of the city and bring in here the poor and the crippled and blind and lame.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered is done, and still there is space.' And the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in so my house is filled, for I say to you that none of those men who were invited will taste of my dinner.'"

Thomas 64 (translated by B.M. Metzger): Jesus said, "A man had guests, and when he had prepared the banquet, he sent his servant to summon the guests. He went to the first (and) said to him, 'My master summons you.' He said, 'Some merchants owe me some money; they will come to me this evening; I will go and give them orders. I pray to be excused from the dinner.' He went to another (and) said to him, 'My master has summoned you.' He said to him, 'I have bought a house, and they request

me for a day; I will have no leisure.' He came to another (and) said to him, 'My master summons you.' He said to him, 'My friend will celebrate a wedding and I am to direct the banquet. I will not be able to come. I pray to be excused from the banquet.' He went to another (and) said to him, 'My master summons you.' He said to him, 'I have bought a village; I go to collect the rent; I will not be able to come. I pray to be excused.' The servant came (and) said to his master, 'Those whom you summoned to the banquet have excused themselves.' The master said to his servant, 'Go out to the streets, bring those whom you will find, so that they may dine.' The buyers and the merchants [shall] not [come] into the places of my Father."

I. There are obvious similarities between these three stories. In each

A. An important man sends out one or more servants to invite his important associates to a banquet.

B. The associates do not come.

C. The man then has his servant(s) invite the wretched people in the streets to come to the banquet. Note that the food had to be eaten at once or it would spoil.

D. The man also takes action so that the important people who scorned the invitation will not be able to change their minds and come.

II. There are, however, great differences between the versions. Here are the most noteworthy:

A. In Matthew

1. The man is a king, and the dinner is a marriage feast for his Son.

2. The invitation goes out to the important people twice.

3. The important people not only do not come but some of them kill the king's slaves who gave the invitations.

4. The king responds by slaughtering the murderers and burning down their city.

5. The street people who come include both good and bad.

6. The king visits the banquet, notices someone who is not properly dressed, and expels him.

7. The parable ends with the reflection that many are called but few are chosen.

B. In Luke

1. The important people who are invited give various excuses for why they cannot come.

2. Then the host sends out his slave twice to invite the wretched. First there is an invitation to the wretched in the city. Then there is an invitation to those outside.

C. In Thomas

1. The excuses are different from those in Luke (e.g., someone has bought a village and must collect the rent).

2. The parable ends with a condemnation of business people.

Note: In the rest of these lectures I will only refer to Thomas when its

version of a parable is especially interesting. Since it is not part of the Bible, Thomas is not authoritative for Christians, and since Thomas as a whole is dependent on the canonical gospels, it is not usually an independent source for material about Jesus.

- III. There are two basic ways of explaining these similarities and differences.
 - A. Jesus told all the various versions of the story perhaps partly in response to different situations and to make different points.
 - B. Jesus told only one version of the story, and the variations are due to later people who modified the story partly to fit their own theologies and situations.
- IV. There must be truth in both explanations.
 - A. Jesus certainly made some changes in the stories he told.
 - 1. As an itinerant preacher, he must have told at least some of the same stories many times.
 - 2. He did not use identical wording when retelling a story and may have changed minor details of the plot arbitrarily.
 - 3. Of course, he may have deliberately changed significant details in response to a particular audience or event.
 - 4. Therefore, at least some of the differences in the versions of the Parable of the Great Supper are due to Jesus himself.
 - B. The tradition also made changes in the parables.
 - 1. Those who heard Jesus's parables did not remember the exact wording and the minor details.
 - 2. And when they repeated a parable, they changed the wording and minor details.
 - 3. And they also may have made deliberate changes to address a new situation. This flexibility would have been especially great if it was recalled that Jesus had done the same.
 - 4. Therefore, some of the differences in the versions of the Parable of the Great Supper are due to later tradition rather than to Jesus.
- V. What we can be reasonably sure goes back to Jesus is the material that is common to all the versions.
- VI. Consequently, at least the following is part of the original message of the parable.
 - A. Socially prominent people must stop ignoring Jesus's preaching, because if they do not they will suffer and not be able to benefit later. More specifically, the everyday pleasures and responsibilities of the lives of the well-off must not hinder accepting Jesus's kingdom.
 - B. The downtrodden are listening to Jesus and will receive a great reward and be better off than the important people who ignored the message.
 - C. The reward for those who listen to Jesus seems to include the blessings of being members of Jesus's community in the present and vindication at the final judgment. Note that Jesus celebrated the coming of the kingdom with meals and looked forward to a final banquet from which some would be excluded (e.g., Matt. 8:11-12).
- VII. We can also be sure that unique details in a particular version of the parable that

cohere with the gospel's particular situation and message must at least have been intended by the evangelist.

VIII. Thus, Matthew's special version of the parable addresses his response to the persecution of Jewish Christianity and the destruction of Jerusalem and the growing dominance of Gentile Christianity.

- A. We know that Mark wrote about the time of the destruction of Jerusalem (see Mark 13; note especially, verses 1-2, 14).
- B. Matthew used Mark as a source and must be later.
- C. During this later period Jewish Christianity suffered persecution from the Pharisaic leadership of the Jewish community and began to decline.
- D. Gentile Christianity, by contrast, continued to grow and began to dominate the Church.
- E. Matthew's version of the Parable reflects these events.
 - 1. Matthew's version is a detailed allegory.
 - 2. The king is God, the Son is Jesus, and the wedding feast is salvation.
 - 3. The first group of slaves who invite people to the feast are the Hebrew prophets and probably John the Baptist who looked forward to the coming of the messiah.
 - 4. The second group of slaves who invite people are the Christian missionaries who proclaim that Jesus is the messiah. Matthew has a whole chapter on Christian missionary activity (ch. 10).
 - 5. The mistreatment of the slaves is the persecution of the Church at the hands of the Jewish leadership.
 - 6. The destruction of the murderers and the burning of their city is the devastation caused by the Roman reconquest of Israel, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem. In Matthew's view the disaster was God's punishment for Jews rejecting Christianity.
 - 7. The crowds that come to the wedding feast include Christian Jews but are primarily Gentile Christians who are flocking into the Church.
 - 8. The man without a wedding garment symbolizes Gentile Christians who enter the Church but do not actually live up to the high ethical standards that Matthew expects.
 - 9. The man's expulsion is God's condemnation of lax Christians at the Last Judgment. Note that being expelled into the farthest darkness implies damnation.

IX. In Luke's version of the parable, the double invitation, first to the wretched of the city and then to those outside symbolizes the coming of the gospel, first to poor and outcast Jews and then to the Gentile world and is practically an outline of Luke-Acts.

- A. The gospel stresses that Jesus's primary ministry is to and for the poor and the disabled (e.g., Luke 6:20-21). Note that just before the parable, Jesus insists on the importance of ministering to the poor and disabled (Luke 14:13).
- B. The Acts records how the gospel spread from Israel to the Gentile world.

X. The Gospel of Thomas reflects Gnostic theology that views the material world as worthless, and the condemnation of business people at the conclusion of the parable is

in line with that theology.

The Difficulty in Interpreting the Parables; One Possible Solution

I. The gospels contain numerous “parables,” and it is important to know how to interpret them.

II. There are serious problems in interpreting the “parables.”

A. The category of “parables” is itself broad and vague.

1. The etymology of the Greek word (*parabole*) suggests a comparison of two different things.

a. “Para” means “beside,” as in parallel lines.

b. “Ballein” means to throw, as in ballistics.

2. Hence, a parable throws two things together and invites us to make sense of the juxtaposition. A parable literally tells about one thing with the understanding that the point is about something else.

3. There is a tremendous variation in the length of the gospel “parables” from a couple of words (Luke 4:23) to an entire short story (Luke 15:11-32).

4. And the term covers all sorts of metaphorical speech. Thus, to our surprise Matthew's Gospel can call the statement that what goes into the mouth does not defile a person, but instead what comes out, a “parable” (Matt. 15:11, 15).

B. However, this series of lectures will only deal with narrative parables. A narrative parable is a fictional or hypothetical story in which at least one character, not necessarily human, does something.

C. There is a tremendous variation in the obviousness of the point of these narratives.

1. Occasionally the gospel actually states the moral (e.g., Luke 18:1).

2. Often there is no explicit interpretation, but nevertheless the meaning is clear as in Matthew's allegorical version of the Parable of the Great Supper (see above).

3. But at other times the point of the parable even puzzled the evangelists. For example, the many desperate morals that Luke attempts to draw from the difficult Parable of the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1-13) attests that neither he nor his source had a clue as to what the parable was supposed to teach. Many modern preachers and scholars seem equally in the dark!

D. It is often difficult to determine whether a parable in the gospels originated in the teaching of Jesus or only in the Early Church.

1. The parables in the gospels are always attributed to Jesus.

2. But if Jesus taught in parables, it seems likely that his students followed his example (John Meier).

3. If they did, it seems even more likely that in time the source of

these parables was forgotten and the parables were subsequently attributed to Jesus.

4. And if Jesus was free to teach in fictional stories, could not his biographers, the evangelists, have felt free to do the same? Certainly, some of the gospel stories about Jesus himself must be later inventions. Here are two clear examples, one from Matthew and one from Mark:

a. Matthew 17:24-27 in which Jesus tells Peter to pay their taxes by catching a fish with a coin in its mouth is obviously a fable. The story does not even say whether Peter actually found the fish! The fable justifies paying the temple tax which the Romans made mandatory and confiscated after the Temple's destruction.

Whether or not Matthew composed the story, he must have *known* that it was not literally true.

b. An example of a fictional story that an evangelist almost certainly composed is the cursing of the fig tree in Mark's Gospel.

1). The narrative comes in two sections:

a). The day after Jesus has visited the temple, he is hungry and sees a fig tree and looks for fruit on it. But since it was not the season for figs, he finds nothing but leaves. He curses the tree so that no one will ever eat from it again (Mark 11:12-14). Then Jesus stages a semi-violent protest in the temple.

b). The next morning the disciples see that the tree has withered, and Peter tells Jesus who then comments on the power of faith (Mark 11:20-23).

2). If the story was historically accurate, Jesus would have acted like a grouch and an idiot. Just because Jesus was hungry, he miraculously destroyed someone else's tree for failing to provide fruit for him at the wrong time of year!

3). But the story makes complete sense in the literary context of Mark's Gospel.

a). Mark has intercalated the destruction of the tree with Jesus's condemnation of the temple, and the tree and its fate become a symbol for the temple's present condition and ultimate fate. Just as the tree has leaves but no fruit, the temple has beautiful architecture but no spiritual substance. Just as the tree withered only after a time, the temple will be destroyed later (Mark 13:1-2).

b). The delay in the destruction of the tree also fits Mark's treatment of faith and miracles. Mark emphasizes that miracles become difficult if there is insufficient faith. In this case, when Peter sees that the fig tree has withered, he seems surprised. Jesus

responds by insisting that with enough faith one can even throw a mountain into the sea.

4). Therefore, Mark probably composed the story of the cursing of the fig tree and left a clear literary indication that the story was not historical by inserting the detail that it was not the season for figs.

5). Subsequently, Matthew basically copied Mark's story but left out the disturbing details that it was not the season for figs and that there was a delay in the tree's destruction (Matt. 21:18-21).

6). Luke, apparently realizing that the story was problematic and might not be historical, omitted it.

5. A different problem, which is frequent in Luke's Gospel, is that Luke often tried to reconstruct something on the basis of limited data, and the reconstruction was mistaken. The familiar story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem is an illustration.

a. Luke knew the historical fact that Jesus's hometown was Nazareth.

b. Luke also knew the tradition, based on a prophecy, that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1-6; Micah 5:2).

c. Then he tried to reconcile these disparate things and assumed that Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem temporarily to register for a census, since Joseph's ancestral town was Bethlehem. As a result, Jesus was born there.

d. But this reconstruction must be mistaken.

1). Matthew has a completely different explanation of how Jesus could have been born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth. Joseph and Mary originally lived in Bethlehem and only ended up in Nazareth because they had to prevent Jesus from being killed by King Herod who feared the birth of a messianic king.

2). No historical census would have required people to leave their present homes and journey to their ancestral town.

6. How are we to distinguish what comes from Jesus and what does not?

E. It is even more difficult to determine whether a parable goes back to Jesus than whether a story about him does, because parables are normally fiction and, therefore, we cannot insist that a parable must be realistic to come from Jesus.

F. The problem of identifying the origin of a parable becomes complicated if part of the parable goes back to Jesus and part does not.

G. Identifying which parts of a parable that go back to Jesus becomes crucial if the explicit moral of the story does not, and the original meaning of the parable has been eclipsed by a later interpretation.

H. And the gospels give us good reason to suspect that often the morals to parables were added later.

1. Sometimes in the gospels Jesus tells a parable publicly and then gives a private explanation to the disciples (especially, Mark 4:3-9, 10-20; Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43; cf. Matt. 15:10-20).
 2. The privacy could be a literary device to signal that the interpretation originated later thanks to the inspiration of the risen Christ. It seems unlikely that when Jesus was teaching publicly he was so unclear that private exegesis was necessary. And surely Jesus did not use parables to make his message deliberately unclear so that the crowds would not understand and their sins be forgiven, despite Mark's claim to the contrary (Mark 4:11-12; see below for more discussion).
 3. Sometimes the moral of a parable is explicitly added by the evangelist and, apparently, is only his interpretation (e.g., Luke 18:1).
 4. And sometimes the interpretation of a parable does not fit the parable well. As noted above, the various interpretations appended to the difficult Parable of the Dishonest Steward seem to be desperate attempts to salvage a distasteful parable in which a character who goes from bad to worse ends up being commended.
- I. Often the gospels do not give us any context for a parable or the context that is given seems to have been added later.
1. We have chapters in the gospels which give us collections of parables (e.g., Mark 4, Matthew 13), and the evangelists have apparently taken parables out of their original contexts and produced an anthology.
 2. Since it is usually easier to remember a story than when and where it was told, it is likely that the evangelists often had to guess what the original context for a parable was.
- J. What the parables meant when Jesus spoke them depends on the larger context of Jesus's teaching and goals, and scholars differ on what these were.
- III. Given these difficulties, it is not surprising that competent scholars have differed, often greatly, on the original message of various parables, and, of course, what I will now offer is only my opinion. In the preparation for these lecture notes, I have especially consulted four illustrations of the extreme diversity of important recent scholarship on the parables.
- A. As its title indicates, Gerhard Lohfink in *The Forty Parables of Jesus* (2020) assumes that a vast number of parables go back to the historical Jesus. Lohfink even accepts a parable from John's Gospel (John 12:24), although this gospel does not call any of its figurative language a "parable."
 - B. By contrast, John P. Meier in *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, volume five: *Probing the Authenticity of the Parables* (2016) argues that only four parables, The Mustard Seed, The Evil Tenants of the Vineyard, The Great Supper, and the Talents/Pounds clearly go back to Jesus. Meier even rejects The Good Samaritan arguing that Luke composed it, although the otherwise highly skeptical Jesus Seminar accepted The Good Samaritan as an indisputable bedrock of Jesus's teaching.
 - C. Klyne R. Snodgrass in *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the*

Parables of Jesus (rev. ed. 2018) systematically reviews all scholarship on the parables down through the centuries and basically argues for a straightforward Evangelical Christian interpretation.

D. By contrast, Amy-Jill Levine in *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (2014) excoriates Christian scholarship on the parables down through the centuries as hopelessly distorted by anti-Semitism and, as the title indicates, argues that the parables are “enigmatic” and very Jewish.

IV. In response to such diversity, I would propose the following methodology:

A. We begin by isolating each parable from its context in the gospels and determine the basic thrust. By beginning this way we will (at least initially) avoid the problems that the details of a parable may have changed on each telling, that the context in the gospels may not be original, and that any “moral” may have been added later.

B. Next we will ask whether this basic thrust fits into what we know of Jesus's life and ministry and, therefore, originated with him or whether the thrust fits better with the conditions of the Church after the resurrection and, therefore, originated then.

C. Only after we have determined when the basic parable originated will we ask whether the parable's context and/or moral in the gospel(s) fit the original parable. If not, we will conclude that these were added later.

D. We will see what the message of the parable was in its original context, and we will also see what the parable meant in the literary context(s) that the evangelist(s) supplied.

E. Then I will turn to the question of how to apply the message(s) of the parable to our situation today, or I will offer a personal reflection.

V. In determining what is the message of a parable we will keep in mind that as literary documents parables have a range of different messages depending on explicitness. Here is a quick taxonomy using “Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water” to illustrate.

A. Primary messages are things that a literary text clearly states (e.g., Jack and Jill went up the hill).

B. Secondary messages are things that a literary text clearly implies (e.g., there was a source of water up the hill).

C. Permissible messages are things that are not clearly implied but are highly coherent with what is clearly stated or implied (e.g., Jack and Jill were siblings).

D. Impermissible messages are things that clearly contradict a primary or secondary message (e.g., there was no hill).

VI. A summary of my (highly original and controversial!) reconstruction of the historical Jesus which we will use to determine whether a parable “fits” his ministry.

A. Jesus wanted to establish a society in which the leaders would act as servants and in which those who presently were marginal would have dignity. The marginal included the poor, the infirm, and “sinners.”

B. To establish this society he believed that God was calling him to become a

ruler.

C. The only practical possibility to become a “King of the Jews” was to get an appointment from the Romans who had appointed (and would continue to appoint) various Jews as client rulers.

D. To get an appointment from the Romans he had to do two things:

1. Gain popular support from Jews so the Romans would take him seriously.

2. Indicate to the Romans that he would not resist Roman oversight.

E. To gain support from Jews, Jesus preached publicly emphasizing that the kingdom that he was establishing would be good for the marginal, and Jesus chose disciples.

F. Then Jesus dramatically staged a protest in the Temple, proclaiming that the Temple was to be a house of prayer for all nations rather than a den of bandits (Mark 11:17; see Isa. 56:7, Jer. 7:11). The protest made it clear that

1. Jesus was opposed to the wealth of the high priesthood. Note that the Temple generated enormous revenues from voluntary offerings and the purchase of animals for sacrifice, and some of this money came from the pious poor. Jesus even pointed out a widow who gave her last cent to the Temple (Mark 12:41-44).

2. Jesus was opposed to using religion to incite rebellion against Rome.

- a. “Bandit” was the negative term for a violent revolutionary.

- b. The declaration that the Temple was to be a house of prayer for all nations implicitly sanctioned Roman presence even in the Temple.

3. Jesus had authority from God to reform the nation.

G. The protest did not lead to a political appointment from Rome and, of course, alienated the high priest and his supporters.

H. When it became clear that Jesus would be killed,

1. He predicted his death (Mark 12:1-8).

2. In line with classical prophecy, he also predicted national catastrophe which would include the destruction of the Temple, because Israel had rejected God's will (Mark 13).

3. And he concluded that his death would help atone for Israel's sin in rejecting him.

I. The high priest seized Jesus and demanded that the Romans execute him.

J. The Romans understood that Jesus was not a threat to them but executed Jesus to avoid a riot from Jewish nationalists.

VII. A major purpose of these lectures is to test whether my controversial reconstruction of the historical Jesus is compatible with a sound interpretation of the parables.

VIII. Finally, I make this plea to those who disagree with my conclusions about what the primary points of the parables were: Please at least be open to the possibility that I have sometimes underlined legitimate secondary or permissible points which continue to be relevant today.

The Parable of the Sower and Its Allegorical Explanation

- I. The Parable of the Sower appears in Mark and also in Matthew and Luke (Mark 4:1-20, Matthew 13:1-23, Luke 8:4-15), both of whom copied Mark making only a couple significant changes . Matthew adds a long quotation from Isaiah (Matt. 13:14-15; Isa. 6:9-10), and both Matthew and Luke add a blessing on the disciples for seeing things that earlier prophets wished to see and did not (Matt. 13:16, Luke 8:23-24).
- II. The parable comes in two parts.
 - A. First Jesus publicly tells the actual narrative.
 - B. Then Jesus gives a private allegorical explanation to his disciples.
- III. An outline of the actual narrative
 - A. A sower scatters seed.
 - B. Much of the seed comes to nothing. Some is eaten immediately by birds; some falls in rocky soil and later withers due to lack of moisture; some is ultimately choked by thorns and bears no grain.
 - C. Some falls into good soil and bears abundantly.
- IV. Taken by itself the narrative seems to stress that despite initial disappointments the sower has an abundant crop.
- V. If we place the parable in the context of Jesus's ministry, the basic message seems to be that despite its modest beginnings and various disappointments (e.g., the execution of John the Baptist) the ministry of Jesus will flourish.
- VI. The message fits well with the historical situation of Jesus, and the basic parable certainly goes back to him.
 - A. Jesus believed that one day he would be a king and his associates would be courtiers, as we can clearly see in a certainly authentic saying recorded in Matthew 19:28.
 1. The saying declares that Jesus will sit on a royal throne, and his twelve apostles will sit on their thrones, and they will bring justice to Israel in the new age.
 2. The saying must go back to the historical Jesus.
 - a. The passage assumes that Judas will be one of those reigning with Jesus and must have originated before Judas betrayed him.
 - b. Shortly after the resurrection the leadership of the church passed from the twelve to three pillars, Peter, John, and James, the brother of Jesus (Gal. 2:9).
 - B. At the time the claim that Jesus was inaugurating a kingdom seemed ridiculous for several reasons.
 1. Jesus himself was a mere carpenter from an obscure village.
 2. His committed followers appear to have been few.
 3. Most of them were not socially prominent, and some of them were disreputable.

- C. Consequently, Jesus was under great pressure to explain how his seemingly pathetic movement could become God's great kingdom.
 - D. The Parable of the Sower without the private explanation gives an agricultural illustration of something that yields abundantly after various setbacks. The implication is that Jesus's kingdom is similar.
- VII. A summary of the allegorical explanation of the Parable of the Sower:
- A. In private Jesus's disciples ask about the parables.
 - B. Jesus replies that his disciples have access to privileged information. And he speaks publicly in parables so that outsiders will not understand and be converted.
 - C. The different fates of the seed stand for different responses to the teaching of Jesus.
 - 1. The seed eaten immediately by the birds represents people who hear Jesus's preaching and do not respond at all.
 - 2. The seed that falls on rocky soil, springs up and then withers for lack of moisture, stands for those who enthusiastically embrace Jesus's movement initially, but later fall away when persecution comes.
 - 3. The seed that is choked by thorns represents those who become Jesus's disciples but subsequently drift away to pursue worldly goals.
 - 4. The seed that bears abundantly represents people who become disciples and faithfully remain so and do much good.
- VIII. This private explanation does not fit well into the setting of the historical Jesus.
- A. It seems incredible that Jesus would deliberately make his public message obscure so that people could not understand.
 - B. It seems even more unlikely that Jesus was trying to prevent people from becoming his followers. According to my reconstruction, Jesus wanted to get as much support as possible so that he could persuade the Roman government that he had popular backing and should be made a client king.
 - C. During Jesus's lifetime there was no persecution of the disciples, and since he hoped to become king, he did not expect future persecution until at the very end of his life his royal hopes failed to materialize.
- IX. Of course, the idea that Jesus would prevent people from accepting his message and gaining salvation is theologically scandalous. Note that Matthew softens the scandal by having Jesus explain that he is fulfilling a prophecy that people have already hardened their hearts so as not to receive the message (Isa. 6:9-10).
- X. Jesus's private explanation does, however, fit well into Mark's situation and his response to it.
- A. Mark wrote during a time of persecution in which Christians were tempted to apostatize.
 - 1. In chapter 13 Mark looks forward to a terrible time of suffering.
 - 2. Mark makes it clear that his intended readers were living at this time by adding, "Let the reader understand" (13:14).
 - 3. Mark also emphasizes that his readers must not apostatize. "You will be hated by all because of my [Jesus's] name, but those who endure to the

end will be saved" (13:13).

4. Historically this was the period of Nero's persecution of Christians living at Rome (65 CE) and of the war in Israel between the Romans and the Jews (66 CE - 70 CE). During the war both sides probably killed Christians. Note that the war climaxed with the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and that in the Old Testament the phrase "devastating sacrilege" (Mark 13:14) refers to the profaning of the temple (Dan. 9:27, 11:31, 12:11, 1 Macc. 1:54).

B. In the parable the section on the seed that sprang up and withered is much longer than the sections on the other seeds and seems to have been expanded by Mark (Gerhard Lohfink).

C. The overall theme of Mark's Gospel is that Jesus did not want people to accept him as God's Son until they knew that he suffered and that as his disciples they would have to suffer too.

1. Early in the gospel, demons publicly proclaim that Jesus is God's Son, and Jesus silences them (Mark 3:11).

2. In the middle of the Gospel God reveals to Peter, James, and John that Jesus is his Son, and Jesus tells them not to share what they have learned until after the resurrection (Mark 9:7-9).

3. Only when Jesus dies on the cross does the Roman centurion proclaim that Jesus is God's Son, and this proclamation comes after the veil of the temple is ripped open (Mark 15:37-39). The rending of the veil symbolizes the new era in which it is time to proclaim that Jesus is God's Son.

a. The veil separated God's dwelling from the world.

b. The rending of the veil removes the barrier between God and humankind.

c. The barrier is removed by the death of Jesus.

d. Now even a Pagan Roman soldier can learn that Jesus is God's Son.

D. Jesus's statement in chapter 4 that he speaks in parables so that people will not understand *at present* fits into Mark's larger theme that people cannot yet receive the message that he is God's Son. Note that only a few verses later Jesus insists that his identity *will be* proclaimed *later* ("There is nothing hidden that will not be revealed" [4:22]).

E. Conversion prior to the crucifixion would only lead to subsequent apostasy, since converts would not be prepared to suffer for their faith.

F. And the allegorical explanation of the seed that fell on the rocky soil explicitly emphasizes the danger of enthusiastic conversion followed by apostasy.

XI. Since the private teaching about the Parable of the Sower fits so completely into the message of Mark, it follows that Mark himself produced the allegorical explanation of the Parable of the Sower. Matthew and Luke who used Mark as a source basically copied the material.

XII. And Mark used the literary device of private teaching to signal that this interpretation came not from Jesus's public proclamation but from Jesus's special message about the implications of the parable for the time in which Mark himself was living.

XIII. Mark suggests that for him the Parable of the Sower with its private allegorical explanation is the primary parable.

A. This is the first parable in Mark.

B. And Mark suggests that we must understand its message to understand any other parable. "Do you not know this parable? And how will you know all the parables?" (4:13).

XIV. Certainly the allegorical interpretation of how people respond to the gospel is always applicable. There are always people who never respond to the Christian message; always people who respond enthusiastically but then fall away; always people who become Christians but whose Christianity is subsequently neglected as they pursue worldly goals; always people who continue to be faithful and bear fruit for a lifetime.

XV. In my own very different situation as a teacher, this parable with its allegorical interpretation has also been the primary one.

A. I cannot make anyone learn.

B. All I can do is cover material or, to use the image of the parable, scatter seed.

C. Whether the students learn anything depends on what is already there, or to use the image of the parable, on the soil.

D. Most of my teaching comes to nothing.

1. Some students do not do any work or even pay much attention during the lectures. They are like the seed that the birds ate at once.

2. Other students are only interested in getting a good grade and cram for the final and soon forget everything. They are like the seed which fell on the rocky soil and sprang up quickly and then withered.

3. Other students are receptive either to my methodology of disciplined intellectual analysis or to my underlying message of the importance of having a relationship with God and serving others. But later they pursue worldly goals, and what I taught them comes to nothing. They are like the seed that fell among the thorns.

4. A handful of students learn the material carefully and retain important parts of it. Years later they tell me that my teaching has continued to benefit them and thank me. They are like the seed which bore a hundredfold and make my teaching worthwhile.

XVI. Two important secondary meanings of the parable, one for Jesus's time and one for our own:

A. In the case of Jesus, at least in my reconstruction, the parable came true in a way which he did not expect.

1. I believe that Jesus hoped that he could gain enough popular support that the Romans would ultimately appoint him as king of Judea and that he could implement his vision of a society in which there would be

equality and justice.

2. Of course, that vision collapsed, and Jesus himself suffered torture and death.

3. Yet as the parable proclaims, the kingdom despite great disappointment bore fruit. Through his resurrection Jesus founded the Church which (along with much evil) has accomplished much more good than Jesus could have as king of Judea.

B. In our case, we Christians must have faith that the parable will come true through us in a way we cannot presently know.

1. In the traditionally Christian United States and Western Europe the Church is in severe decline, and there is every reason to assume that the decline will continue.

2. In this situation it is easy to imagine that our efforts will come to nothing.

3. We must have faith that because the risen Christ rules the universe our efforts, both individually and collectively, will also bear abundant fruit, probably in a way that we cannot now imagine.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Leaven

Matthew 13:31-32: Another parable he [Jesus] put before them, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard which a man took and sowed in his field, which is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it is grown is bigger than vegetables and becomes a tree so that the birds of heaven come and nest in its branches.”

Mark 4:30-32: And he [Jesus] said, “How shall we compare the kingdom of God, or with what parable shall we put it? It is like a grain of mustard, which when it is sown on the earth is smaller than all the seeds on the earth. Yet when it is sown, it comes up and becomes bigger than all vegetables and makes great branches, so that the birds of heaven can nest under its shadow.”

Luke 13:18-19: So he [Jesus] said, “To what is the kingdom of God like, and to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard, which a man took and threw into his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of heaven nested in its branches.”

I. The three versions of the Parable of the Mustard Seed have the same basic outline.

A. Introduction: The kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed.

B. Narrative

1. A mustard seed grows into a huge plant.

2. And it provides a nesting place for birds.

II. But there are major differences in detail.

A. The versions in Matthew and Luke

1. State that a man planted the mustard seed.

2. The mustard seed became (like) a tree.
 3. The birds nest(ed) in its branches.
- B. The version in Mark
 1. Says nothing about a person.
 2. Has the birds nesting in the shadow (that is, the shade) of the plant.
- C. The versions in Mark and Matthew explicitly mention that the mustard seed is the smallest seed and that the mustard plant becomes bigger than vegetables (herbs? Mustard was and still is a condiment).
- III. The history of the relationship between the versions is debatable.
- IV. Nevertheless, it is clear that more than one version of the parable was in circulation, and this multiple attestation suggests that the common outline of the parable goes back to Jesus (John Meier).
- V. The version in Mark is probably closer to what Jesus said.
 - A. Jesus was from a rural area and was acutely aware of nature.
 - B. He would have known that the branches of a mustard plant are not big and strong enough to support birds and a nest.
 - C. Jesus's kingdom in which the poor would be blessed and the leaders would be servants was contrary to other sorts of kingdoms.
 - D. The “tree” of the versions in Matthew and Luke probably arose by the application of the conventional metaphor of a great king being like a huge tree which provides branches for birds to nest (Ezek. 17:22-24, Daniel 4:10-12, 20-22).
 1. After the resurrection the Church worshiped Jesus as the supreme king who was presently reigning in heaven and would return to reign over the earth.
 2. Consequently, it was natural apply to him biblical metaphors about previous great kings.
- VI. The original point of the parable was that the small movement of Jesus would like the mustard seed grow into something great, but nevertheless humble, which would provide shelter for all.
- VII. The Parable of the Leaven
 - A. Occurs in Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:20-21.
 - B. It is paired with the Parable of the Mustard Seed.
 - C. Summary of the parable: The kingdom of God is like leaven that a woman hid in a large quantity of flour, and the whole was leavened.
 - D. The point is similar to that of the Parable of the Mustard Seed: The small movement of Jesus will ultimately make a great difference. The image of a woman *hiding* leaven in a mound of flour is striking and unexpected and only makes sense in the context of the present hiddenness of the kingdom and its anticipated great manifestation.
 - E. The unexpected image of hiding
 1. Fits well with Jesus's
 - a. Own rhetorical style of using unexpected images

- b. Understanding of the present state of the kingdom (e.g., Luke 17:20-21).
 - 2. Is a clear indication that the parable goes back to him.
- F. However, it is uncertain whether Jesus himself told a double parable or later tradition paired the two parables because of their similar content.
- G. The amount of bread in the parable is surprisingly big, about a bushel, and a secondary meaning of the parable or, at least, a permissible one, is that the kingdom will provide nourishment for a vast number of people.
 - 1. It is unlikely that a woman would make a bushel of bread for her family.
 - 2. Consequently, she is either producing bread for a larger community, or the detail in the parable is not realistic.
 - 3. Either way, the large amount of bread invites the conclusion that the kingdom will provide bread for a multitude.
 - 4. This implicit meaning is in keeping with Jesus's explicit teaching that when the kingdom came in power those who were presently hungry would be filled (Luke 6:20-21). The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand acted out the same point.

The Parable of the Dishonest Steward, the Parable of the Unjust Judge, the Parable of the Rich Fool, the Parable of the Two Builders, and the Parable of the Shameless Friend

- I. The Parable of the Dishonest Steward appears only in Luke and comes in two sections.
 - A. The actual narrative (Luke 16:1-8a).
 - B. A series of loosely connected morals to the story (Luke 16:8b-13).
- II. A summary of the narrative.
 - A. A rich man hears that his steward is wasting his property.
 - B. The rich man tells the steward that he is losing his job and to turn in the records.
 - C. The steward assesses his options and sees that his situation is desperate. He is not strong enough to resort to physical labor and not psychologically prepared to beg.
 - D. He concocts a scheme so that the rich man's debtors will help him after he loses his job.
 - E. He asks them what they owe, they tell him, he greatly reduces the debt and has the debtors enter the reduced debt into the books.
 - F. The rich man commends the steward, because he acted shrewdly.
- III. A summary of the various morals of the story. Note: The meaning of these morals is sometimes obscure, and here I offer only an opinion.
 - A. Christians should be as wise in spiritual matters as the steward was in material ones (16:8b).

- B. Make friends by giving them money so that later God will reward you after death (16:9).
- C. If you are not ethical in using money, how can you expect anyone to trust you in more important (spiritual?) things (16:10-11).
- D. If you are not faithful when you use other people's property, who will give anything to you? (16:12).
- E. No one can serve both God and money (16:13). Note:
 - 1. This is an independent saying of Jesus, since it appears in Matthew 6:24 and makes sense without the parable.
 - 2. However, Luke uses the saying as a commentary on the Parable of the Dishonest Steward.

IV. If we now consider the narrative without the various morals, there are two major problems:

- A. Why does the rich man commend the steward after the steward has defrauded him?
- B. What could be the point of this story in which an incompetent man turns into a crook and is explicitly commended by his master and implicitly commended by Jesus himself?

V. The parable implies that the rich man commends the steward, because the steward deceives him.

- A. The rich man's original complaint against the steward is mismanaging (literally, "scattering") the property.
- B. By implication, the master is not getting the returns that would be expected for the size of the investment.
- C. The questions that the steward later asks about the amount of the loans suggests that part of the mismanagement is that the steward has not been keeping any books and, therefore, has no books to give to the rich man.
- D. By fraudulently reducing the loans and having the debtors in their own handwriting enter the new figures into the records, the steward convinces the rich man that he had much less property than he previously thought.
- E. The rich man concludes that far from mismanaging the property, the steward has gotten excellent returns given the (much understated!) size of the property.

VI. The long series of suggested morals for the story shows that the story itself must go back to Jesus and the morals were appended only later.

- A. The various morals seem at best only vaguely related to the narrative. The final moral, that one cannot serve God and money, actually contradicts the narrative, since throughout the story the steward serves money and yet by doing so he helps others by reducing their debts, thus ironically serving God!
 - 1. Jesus was especially concerned about debt and emphasized the importance of forgiving debt in the Lord's Prayer and, as we shall see, in other parables.
 - 2. Many of the rural poor whose support Jesus was seeking were probably burdened with debt and must have been amused and

sympathetic when the steward successfully deceives his boss by reducing debt.

B. The fact that there are so many competing morals to the Parable of the Dishonest Steward implies that there were many attempts to get an edifying message from a seemingly immoral narrative.

C. That the narrative had to be explained rather than ignored indicates that it had previously existed and was authoritative.

D. Therefore, the story without the morals must go back to Jesus himself.

VII. Since the dishonest steward is completely successful, the original point of the story must have been that he did something commendable and it was a model for Jesus's audience.

VIII. But since the steward is completely selfish throughout the story and proceeds from incompetence to fraud, his behavior is despicable.

IX. However, what is commendable is that the steward is realistic about his dire situation and takes the drastic action that is necessary to save himself. The steward faces the fact that he is too weak to dig and too ashamed to beg. And he turns to crime because there is no other option.

X. The point of the story is that total selfishness is acceptable *if you realize what is actually in your self-interest and take drastic action to gain it*, and in the present situation what you must do is heed the warnings of Jesus.

A. Jesus did not proclaim that people should follow him because it was the *decent* thing to do.

B. Instead, people should follow him because it was the only *safe* thing to do. Those who disregarded his message were building their houses on sand, and these houses would collapse when the storm struck (Matt. 7:26-27). See below for an analysis of this parable.

XI. The Parable of the Unjust Judge appears only in Luke 18:1-8.

XII. A summary of the parable:

A. Introduction and moral: Jesus told this parable to his disciples to show that “it is necessary to pray always and not become discouraged.”

B. Narrative

1. There was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people.

2. A widow kept coming and asking him to grant her justice against an opponent.

3. For a time the judge was not willing.

4. But then he told himself that even though he did not fear God nor respect people, he would grant the widow justice because the widow was bothering him and might ultimately give him a black eye. Note that the verb sometimes translated as “wear down” or “exhaust” actually means blacken the eye or strike in the face.

C. Commentary

1. The Lord said that if an unrighteous judge acted so, God will surely quickly give justice to his elect who continually cry to him.

2. But when Jesus returns will he find faithfulness?

- XIII. The commentary fits much of the preceding chapter which deals with patiently waiting for Jesus to return and the assurance that he will do so (Luke 17:22-35).
- XIV. But neither the introduction nor the commentary fit the narrative of the parable.
- A. The introduction assumes that the heroine of the following narrative is the widow, but the story itself is primarily about the judge. It is the judge who changes his mind.
 - B. There is nothing in the narrative that suggests that we need to wait for Jesus to return and judge the world. The widow receives justice already in the story.
- XV. Moreover, during his ministry Jesus could not have been talking about his future triumphant return to judge the world.
- A. According to my reconstruction Jesus was trying to gain popular support for his attempt to get a political appointment from the Roman government. It was only after the resurrection that the Church suffering persecution awaited eagerly the return of Jesus.
 - B. Even if my reconstruction is mistaken, it is historically hard to imagine Jesus proclaiming even before he was arrested that he would later rise from the dead and return to judge the world. What would people had thought about such a claim?
- XVI. It seems that Luke himself crafted the introduction to the parable.
- A. Luke does not even claim that *Jesus* said that the moral of the story was to pray and not get discouraged.
 - B. Luke's gospel in general emphasizes both the effectiveness of prayer despite initial disappointment (already Luke 1:5-25) and that God raises up women who have been put down by humans (already Luke 1:24-25, 1:46-48).
 - C. Hence, it seems that Luke is imposing his own perspective on the parable.
 - D. I would argue that Luke's imposition is only a permissible message (see above for this category) from the parable. Yes, the persistence and success of the widow are in the story, and it is permissible to apply these to prayer. But the primary point is elsewhere.
- XVII. Since just before the parable Luke was recording material about the return of Christ to judge the world, it seems that he imposed this theme too on the parable itself.
- XVIII. The unjust judge is very much like the dishonest steward.
- A. Both characters are completely selfish. The judge neither fears God nor respects people; the steward is only concerned for his own well-being.
 - B. Both characters have a crisis, though the judge's is less serious. He just has to get rid of the widow who bothers him and may resort to violence. The steward is afraid of losing his job and being without resources.
 - C. Both the steward and the judge decide to help others. The judge decides to help the widow, just as the steward helps the creditors.
- XIX. Therefore, the original point of the Parable of the Unjust Judge is basically the same as the original point of the Parable of the Dishonest Steward: If one truly realizes what is actually in one's self-interest, one will heed the message of Jesus and do what is right.

XX. The Parables of the Dishonest Steward and the Unjust Judge seem to be especially addressed to the unethical.

- A. Of course, no one is completely righteous; everyone is selfish to some extent.
- B. These two parables are to some extent relevant to us all.
- C. But they seem especially addressed to people who will not repent out of goodness, but only out of selfishness.
- D. Therefore, they are a positive invitation to the wicked to join Jesus's kingdom.
- E. And the parables reflect Jesus's insistence that he came primarily to save sinners (Mark 2:17).

XXI. The Parable of the Rich Fool occurs only in Luke 12:16-21 in the New Testament Gospels.

XXII. A summary of the parable:

- A. A saying from a previous section that also serves as a preface to the parable: Beware of greed, because the abundance of possessions does not give life (Luke 12:15).
- B. The narrative:
 - 1. The land of a rich man yielded well.
 - 2. The man considered what he should do, since he had no further room to store his crops.
 - 3. He decided to pull down his present barns and build larger ones.
 - 4. He told himself that he would then store all his goods and have enough for years of enjoyment.
 - 5. But God said to him that he was a fool because this night his life would be taken, and all of the things which the rich man prepared for himself would go to someone else.
- C. The moral: "So it is for someone who stores up for himself and is not rich in respect to God."

XXIII. The obvious point of the parable that it is foolish to make the goal of life amassing material things with the expectation that one can obtain longterm security and happiness by doing so.

XXIV. Since many people today have as their primary goal to become rich in order to enjoy a secure, long, and luxurious retirement, this parable is especially challenging now (Klyne Snodgrass).

XXV. The Parable of the Rich Fool has nothing specific about the teaching of Jesus and could have come from any wisdom source (note Ecclesiastes 2:18-21).

XXVI. However, the parable does fit well both with Jesus's general condemnation of seeking wealth (e.g., Matt. 6:19-21) and instance that enlightened selfishness will lead one to follow his warnings (see the discussion of the Parables of the Dishonest Steward and the Unjust Judge above).

XXVII. Therefore, it probably is best to attribute the parable to Jesus himself.

XXVIII. The parable illustrates that in contrast to enlightened selfishness, foolish selfishness leads to catastrophe.

XXIX. Appendix: “Must” ethics Rather than “should” ethics

- A. In modern times ethical exhortation has often focused on persuading us to do what is right in order to satisfy our “conscience.”
- B. It is common experience that such exhortation is seldom effective, especially in dealing with a group.
- C. Even most individuals are not inclined to make major sacrifices for others outside of their immediate family.
- D. Our “consciences” are only a small part of our entire personality.
- E. Thanks at least in part to evolution, our strongest individual drive is for self-preservation.
- F. Hence, our consciences seldom prevail over massive self-interest, especially since it is so easy to dupe our consciences through rationalizations.
- G. On the group level the weakness of advocating that the group should make major sacrifices for the welfare of others is even greater.
- H. What human beings most want after meeting their basic needs for survival is approval from others.
- I. By definition, the people we most interact with belong to the groups of which we are part.
- J. Therefore, individuals especially depend on approval from their groups, and it is extremely hard for individuals to ask a group of which they are part to sacrifice the group's self-interest.
- K. It is especially hard for the leaders of a group to recommend collective self-sacrifice to benefit outsiders (Reinhold Niebuhr).
 - 1. The primary responsibility of leaders is to look after the group.
 - 2. The leader does not have the authority to ask other members of the group to sacrifice for people who are not members.
- L. Hence, in practice groups almost never make collective self-sacrifice for the benefit of outsiders.
- M. And those who try to get the group to act ethically toward outsiders almost always claim (often most implausibly) that doing so will benefit the group itself.
- N. Consequently, the Bible seldom makes ethical demands on the basis of altruism. Instead, the Bible demands that we please God by having compassion on the rest of his children.
- O. And since God is the ruler of the universe who repays good and evil both in this life and the life to come, it is always in our ultimate interest, whether individually or collectively, to do what God wants.

XXX. The Parable of the Two Builders:

Matthew 7:24-27: All who hear these words of mine and do them will be like an intelligent man who built his house on rock. And the rain came down and the rivers swelled and the winds blew and fell on that house, and it did not fall for it had been founded on rock. And all who hear these words of mine and do not do them will be

like a stupid man who built his house on sand. And the rain came down and the rivers swelled and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and its collapse was total.

Luke 6:47-49: All who come to me and hear my words and do them, I will show you to what they are like. They are like a person building a house who dug deep and put down a foundation on rock. And when the flood came, the river burst on that house and could not shake it because it was well built. But those who hear and do act are like a person building a house on the ground without a foundation. The river shattered it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was complete.

XXXI. The basic outline of the different versions of the double parable is the same.

A. First introduction: Whoever hears and follows the words of Jesus is like

B. First narrative:

1. A man who founded his house on rock

2. And when there was a storm or a flood, the house survived.

C. Second introduction: Whoever hears and does not follow the words of Jesus is like

D. Second narrative:

1. A man who built a house without a foundation

2. And when there was a storm or flood, the house collapsed.

XXXII. However, as can immediately be seen even in English translation, the wording and other details of the two versions are very different. Perhaps the most interesting discrepancy is the different explanations for the collapse of the second house.

A. In Matthew the house collapses because of a severe storm.

B. In Luke a flooding river destroys the house.

C. Probably Luke has altered the cause of the collapse in accordance with what would be more likely in the areas in which he lived.

XXXIII. Because there are so many variations in detail and only the basic outline is the same in the two versions of the double parable, I believe that Luke had a different source than Matthew.

XXXIV. Because of the double attestation, the basic parable goes back to Jesus.

XXXV. The primary point of the double parable is obviously that those who act in accordance with the words of Jesus will be safe, and those who do not will suffer disaster.

XXXVI. The parable leaves open when and how the disaster will occur. I suspect that Jesus believed

A. This disaster could easily occur already in this present time, as it did in the Parable of the Rich Fool.

B. The disaster will certainly occur at the final reckoning when the living and the dead will receive their due on the Day of Judgment (Matt. 11:20-24, 12:41-42; Mark 9:43-48).

XXXVII. The double parable was primarily addressed to Jesus's disciples, since the

parable is to those who hear Jesus's word.

XXXVIII. Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of the double parable is that Jesus makes his own teaching, rather than other Jewish tradition, the standard by which people will ultimately be saved or destroyed, especially at the last judgment. The implicit claims about Jesus's own authority and identity are startling (Klyne Snodgrass).

XXXIX. The Parable of the Shameless Friend appears only in Luke 11:5-8.

XL. A summary of the Parable

A. Introduction: Who among you will have a friend . . .

B. Narrative

1. And go to the friend at midnight and ask for bread to feed a guest who just arrived from a journey
2. And the friend replies that he and his children are in bed and he cannot get up.
3. Even if the person will not help you from friendship, he will get up and provide you as much bread as you need if you are shameless. Note: Some translations render the Greek word that should be translated as "shameless" with some other English word meaning persistence. There is no basis in the Greek original for this mistranslation.

C. Moral: Ask, and God will supply.

XLI. The two characters in this hypothetical narrative have similarities with characters in the Parable of the Unjust Judge.

A. The "you" in the parable is similar to the widow in the Parable of the Unjust Judge.

1. Both "you" and the widow have legitimate needs.
 - a. You need bread to feed a hungry guest.
 - b. The widow needs to have her lawsuit heard.
2. To gain what they need both characters violate normal restraint.
 - a. The widow keeps pestering the judge.
 - b. At midnight you bother a friend and his family who are in bed.

B. Your friend is like the judge.

1. Neither your friend nor the judge will help a needy person from decency.
2. But both will do what is right to get rid of a someone who bothers them.

XLII. Certainly the Parable of the Shameless Friend does make the same point as the Parable of the Unjust Judge: Enlightened selfishness does lead to doing God's will. The man who was in bed does provide needed bread for the hungry traveler to get rid of his shameless friend.

XLIII. As in the case of the Parable of the Unjust Judge, Luke applies the Parable of the Shameless Friend to prayer, a topic of special interest to him.

XLIV. It is certainly permissible for Luke to apply the parable to prayer.

XLV. And I have no problem with being shameless in prayer, for example, asking God

to make you the winner of the multi-million dollar lottery, provided that you respect God's freedom to deny your request. It is striking that Luke in his extended commentary on the parable carefully limits what you can be sure God will grant when you ask.

- A. Luke insists, "Everyone who asks receives" (Luke 11:10).
- B. However, Luke qualifies this seeming bank check by changing something in the tradition which apparently he is using.
 - 1. Matthew in a parallel passage insists that God will always give "good things" to those who ask (Matt. 7:11), and Matthew probably has the original form of the saying.
 - 2. Luke omits "good things" and replaces them with the "Holy Spirit," thus indicating that we can only be sure that if we sincerely make our requests known to God, God's Spirit will dwell more deeply within us.
 - 3. I agree with Luke.
 - a. Sometimes when people pray for a specific thing they receive it; sometimes they do not.
 - b. However, whenever people sincerely turn to God in prayer, God always deepens his presence in their lives.

XLVI. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Luke's commentary reflects the original point of the parable.

XLVII. Instead, the parable originally defended Jesus's "shameless" association with sinners.

- A. Despite the many parallels between the "you" in the parable and the unjust judge, there is one crucial difference, the "you" acts virtuously.
 - 1. The judge initially refused to hear the widow's case out of selfishness.
 - 2. You in the parable act to provide bread to a presumably hungry and exhausted friend who at midnight arrived from a journey.
- B. Therefore, the parable justifies shameless behavior when it serves the needs of those who are in deep trouble.
- C. And surely Jesus saw himself as the primary illustration of this principle.
 - 1. He lost public respect by ministering to "sinners."
 - 2. He insisted that God was calling him to save sinners and that God loved them.
- D. Therefore, the Parable of the Shameless Friend was originally a defense of Jesus's own primary ministry.
 - 1. Yes, by associating with sinners, Jesus was being shameless.
 - 2. But precisely because he was willing to suffer the stigma of violating social norms of acceptable behavior he could reach out to those most in need of help.
 - 3. And because of his shamelessness, the sinners would, as the man in bed did, give in and do what is right, which in their case meant enter the kingdom of God.
- E. An implication is that sometimes in obedience to Jesus's example we must suffer the loss of public respectability. "We must bear patiently . . . not being

thought good” (Francis of Assisi).

XLVIII. I would draw the permissible point from the parable that there is hope for every individual, no matter how evil, and hope for humanity, no matter how foolish, because God is shameless.

A. If God's mercy was limited to people who could justifiably ask for it, there would be no hope of salvation for many.

B. But because God is shameless, there is hope for us all.

LXIX. Excursus: Comedy and tragedy in the Parables of Jesus.

A. Both comedy and tragedy underline the faults of their characters.

1. Comedy must focus on faults, because it is difficult and distasteful to ridicule virtues.

2. Tragedy must focus on at least one character flaw, because a character who in all respects is virtuous is not a tragic figure, no matter how unfortunate, but instead is a saint. A narrative about a saint who experiences terrible ordeals tends to be either hagiography or melodrama, not tragedy.

B. Comedy provokes laughter when the failings of the characters do not lead to catastrophe. One cannot laugh at catastrophe, no matter how much it is deserved.

C. By contrast, tragedy leads to tears, because the character through at least one flaw comes to drastic and irreparable harm.

D. The parables of the dishonest steward, the unjust judge and the shameless friend are all funny, and the humor is intended. In all three parables the selfish person ends up doing what is right, albeit for questionable reasons, and suffers no real harm.

E. The Parable of the Rich Fool and the second half of the Parable of the Two Builders at least border on tragedy. Because of their stupidity the fool and the second builder suffer disaster.

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure and the Parable of the Pearl; the Parable of a Man Considering Building a Tower and the Parable of a King Contemplating Battle.

Matt. 13:44: “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid and in his joy went and sold all that he had and bought that field.”

Matt. 13:45-46: “Again the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls and finding one pearl of great value went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

I. The Parable of the Hidden Treasure appears only in Matthew in the New Testament gospels.

II. The brief parable makes or implies several things.

A. At present, the true greatness of God's kingdom which Jesus is beginning is

not obvious; it is hidden.

B. Nevertheless, a person can perceive it.

C. But to have the treasure of the kingdom, one must give up everything else.

D. If one truly realizes what a treasure the kingdom is, one will make this sacrifice with joy.

E. The rewards of following Jesus might come already in this present life and would surely come in the life to come.

1. Since Jesus hoped that he would become an earthly king, albeit one that would renounce the usual privileges of royalty, the rewards of this followers might already occur in this present age.

2. But the rewards would surely come on the Day of Judgement when God would raise the dead and reward everyone who listened to Jesus and obeyed him.

III. The parable fits well with the ministry of Jesus and must come from him.

A. At the time the claim that the small and impoverished movement of Jesus would change the world seemed unlikely to people without discernment.

B. But Jesus insisted that people must realize the future greatness of the kingdom and join now.

C. Those who waited until the kingdom had come in power would suffer.

IV. The parable primarily addressed people who were considering becoming active *followers* of Jesus.

A. Jesus had two types of supporters:

1. Those who believed that he was the messiah but who remained in their previous occupations.

2. Those who literally followed him, abandoning family, home, and occupation to go about with Jesus.

B. The parable in which the person sells everything to acquire the treasure primarily addressed those who were considering joining this second, more exclusive group. Note that on a different occasion Jesus directed a would-be follower to sell all that he had, give it to the poor, and follow Jesus with the assurance that he would have treasure in heaven (Mark 10:21).

C. Nevertheless, the parable is relevant to some extent to all Christians.

Regardless of whether God calls us to abandon everything to serve in some new and drastic way or whether God calls us to remain in our present circumstances and serve there, the most important thing in life is to serve God. And if we truly realize the great rewards of serving God, we will serve joyfully.

V. The man in the parable acts at least shrewdly and perhaps even unethically.

A. Neither the field nor the treasure in it belonged to the man initially.

B. He actively deceived the field's owner by *hiding* the treasure and purchasing the field, presumably for far less than it was actually worth with a treasure in it.

C. We may note in passing that in pre-modern times burying money for safe keeping was common and that even today occasionally someone will by accident find an ancient hoard that may be worth more than the land in which it lies.

VI. Consequently, the Parable of the Hidden Treasure is another illustration of

Jesus's teaching that selfishness is fine provided that it is enlightened selfishness which realizes that it is in one's self-interest to obey Jesus. The presence of this theme in the parable is another sign that the parable comes from Jesus himself.

VII. The Parable of the Pearl appears only in Matthew 13:45-46 in the New Testament gospels and is similar in most respects to the Parable of the Hidden Treasure and comes immediately after it.

A. The structure of the two parables is identical.

1. Both parables begin with, "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ."
2. Both concern a man who discovers something of great value.
3. Both men sell everything and buy it.

B. Matthew highlights the similarities by prefacing the second parable with the word "again," signifying that the Parable of the Pearl is making the same point as the Parable of the Hidden Treasure.

VIII. Nevertheless, the merchant in the Parable of the Pearl behaves naturally and ethically unlike the man in the Parable of the Hidden Treasure.

A. Whereas the man in the Parable of the Hidden Treasure apparently finds the treasure accidentally, the merchant was seeking pearls.

B. The merchant does not deceive anyone.

IX. I suspect that Matthew composed the Parable of the Pearl as a companion piece to the Parable of the Hidden Treasure.

A. Elsewhere Matthew has doublets (e.g., 9:13, 12:7; 19:20, 20:16).

B. Matthew modeled the Parable of the Pearl on the Parable of the Hidden Treasure but omitted the ethically questionable action of the man who hid the treasure.

X. If Matthew composed the Parable of the Pearl as a companion piece to the Parable of the Hidden Treasure, the basic point must be the same, namely it is a treasure to follow Jesus, but one must give up everything to do so.

XI. In Matthew's Gospel the two parables as a unit illustrate the truth that people come to Christianity through diverse paths.

A. Some people find Christianity by accident, as the man did who came upon the treasure in the field without seeking it.

B. Other people find Christianity after a prolonged search for something of great value.

XII. An important secondary meaning of the Parable of the Pearl is that to obtain what is of greatest value we must stop making the focus of our lives becoming wealthy.

A. The biblical tradition has a low opinion of merchants in general (Amy-Jill Levine) and particularly merchants making money through selling luxury goods to the rich (Revelation 18:11-20).

B. The merchant was seeking beautiful pearls and found the one pearl of incomparable value.

C. The pearl of incomparable value is surely not a literal pearl, but the kingdom of God, which is what the parable illustrates. Note that if the pearl of incomparable value was only a literal pearl, the merchant would have to sell it to make a profit.

- D. To obtain the kingdom, the merchant gave up all his wealth.
- E. The warning that disciples of Jesus must not make the focus of their lives becoming rich is most relevant to Christians in capitalistic societies today.

XIII. The Parable of a Man Considering Building a Tower and the Parable of a King Contemplating Battle.

- A. These two parables are only found in Luke 14:27-33 and are a unit since they share a common preface and a common moral.
- B. A summary of the two parables:
 - 1. Preface: "Whoever does not bear his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."
 - 2. First narrative:
 - a. Someone who wants to build a tower first calculates the cost and whether he has enough money to complete the tower.
 - b. Otherwise, he would be ridiculed for laying a foundation and not being able to finish.
 - 3. Second narrative: A king going to meet another king in battle will first consider whether he can withstand the other king's forces, and if he cannot, asks for terms of peace.
 - 4. Moral: None of you can be my disciple unless you give up all your possessions.
- C. The preface obviously does not go back to Jesus, since the challenge to bear one's cross and *follow* Jesus could not have originated before Jesus's own crucifixion.
- D. The two parables and the moral fit well the same situation as the Parable of the Hidden Treasure, namely Jesus addressing people who are considering abandoning everything to become his followers.
- E. However, the Parables of a Man Considering Building a Tower and the King Contemplating Battle give a complementary message to the Parable of the Hidden Treasure.
 - 1. The Parable of the Hidden Treasure stresses the great *reward* of being a follower of Jesus.
 - 2. By contrast, the Parables of a Man Considering Building a Tower and the Parable of a King Contemplating Battle stress the great *cost* of being a follower of Jesus, namely renouncing everything else.
- F. Therefore, the primary message of the two parables is that in considering whether to abandon everything, a person needs to wrestle with two contrasting questions.
 - 1. Will the person be able to remain a follower of Jesus, despite the continuing cost? If not, the person must not become a temporary follower and then have to desert.
 - 2. Is the person willing to give up the great joy and privileges of being a follower of Jesus? If not, the person must allow these to keep him or her faithful despite the cost.

3. I believe that anyone considering becoming a “professional” Christian whether as a missionary or as a monk needs to wrestle with the same questions today.
- G. Since these two parables fit the situation of having to leave one's property, occupation, and family to follow Jesus, they certainly go back to him in substance.
- H. However, I suspect that only the Parable of a Man Considering Building a Tower comes from Jesus and that the Parable of a King Contemplating Battle is a companion piece by Luke.
 1. The first parable is
 - a. More striking. The Parable of the Man Considering Building a Tower contains mockery in direct discourse, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish” (Luke 14:30).
 - b. More relevant. The parable concerns an individual of the same social class as most of the would-be followers of Jesus, namely someone of modest means who may not have enough money to erect a tower. By contrast, the second parable concerns kings going to battle.
 - c. The first parable actually addresses the *cost* of being a follower of Jesus, whereas the Parable of a King Contemplating Battle merely deals with the ability to complete a goal, namely avoiding military defeat.
 2. The differences between the parables suggest that the first parable comes from Jesus, and Luke composed the Parable of a King Contemplating Battle as a companion piece. Luke added the second parable to emphasize the importance of the basic message of not thoughtlessly making commitments that one will not be able to keep.

The Parables of the Talents and of the Pounds

- I. The Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-29) and the Parable of the Pounds (Luke 19:11-27) are closely related. In both parables
 - A. A wealthy master entrusted money to his slaves and went on a journey.
 - B. Two of the slaves invested the money and made a considerable profit.
 - C. One slave hid the money instead of investing it. The slave was afraid of losing the money and facing the master's wrath (Matt. 25:25, Luke 19:21).
 - D. The master returned, and the slaves reported on what they did with the money.
 - E. The master rewarded the slaves who made a profit and gave them greater responsibilities, presumably with greater privileges.
 - F. The master punished the slave who merely hid the money.
 - G. In both versions of the parable there is hyperbole, though in different respects.

1. In Matthew's version the hyperbole is in the huge amount of money for investment.
 2. In Luke's version the hyperbole is in the rewards given to the investors, control over whole cities.
- II. After the slave is punished, both Matthew and Luke add the saying, "To everyone who has, it will be given," "from the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away" (Matt. 25:29, Luke 19:26).
- III. Nevertheless, there are substantial differences between the parables.
- A. As we would expect, many of the differences are details that would change as the story was repeatedly told orally. For example, in Matthew the slave hid the money by burying it in the ground, whereas in Luke he hid the money in a napkin.
 - B. But in Luke there is a surrounding narrative that is totally missing in Matthew. In Luke
 1. The purpose of the master's journey was to receive royal power.
 2. The citizens of the land sent a delegation opposing the grant.
 3. The master received royal power, and on his return had the delegation killed.
 4. We may note in passing that this narrative fits well with the politics of the time in which local dignitaries had to go to Rome for appointment to high office and at least occasionally delegations opposing the appointment also went.
- IV. Because of the similarities and differences it is difficult to determine whether these two parables were originally both told by Jesus or whether he told only one parable which morphed into two in the oral tradition or in editing by Luke.
- V. My own guess is that Luke is primarily responsible for the addition of a narrative of gaining royal power.
- A. Luke prefaces the parable by saying that Jesus was nearing Jerusalem and people thought that the "kingdom of God would appear immediately" (Luke 19:11).
 - B. The preface is in accord with Luke's editing elsewhere which, in response to the delay in the expected return of Jesus, adjusts the tradition.
 1. Mark 13 assumes that the return of Jesus will occur shortly after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (Mark 13:14, 24-27).
 2. Luke 21 describes the destruction of the Temple (Luke 21:20) and says that Christ will not return until "the times of the Gentiles are completed" (Luke 21:24).
 3. Similarly, in the Acts of the Apostles when the disciples ask the risen Jesus if he will "at this time restore the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1:6), Jesus responds by saying that it is not for them to know the time, but they must now take the gospel to the end of the Earth.
 4. The preface to the parable in Luke implies that the nobleman who has become king is the risen Jesus and that when he returns he will punish those who earlier despised him.

VI. Both Matthew and Luke interpret the basic story as a warning that Jesus's return which previously had been expected to be sooner will nevertheless surely come, and he will reward the righteous and punish the worthless.

A. In Matthew

1. The master returns only "after a long time" (25:19).
2. The punishment for the slave who did not invest, being cast into outer darkness, sounds like final damnation, as the similar punishment in Matthew 22:13 also does.
3. Right after the parable Matthew has the coming of Jesus in glory and the final judgment (see below for a discussion of this passage).

B. As noted above, in Luke's version the man who receives royal power must be the risen Jesus who now reigns in heaven and will one day return to judge the world.

VII. When Jesus told the parable, the point must have been different.

A. The basic parable must go back to Jesus.

1. Major details of the parable in Luke differ greatly from those in Matthew.
 - a. The amount of money is much greater in Matthew than in Luke.
 - b. In Matthew the two slaves who invested receive different amounts of money but both slaves doubled it.
 - c. By contrast, in Luke all the slaves received the same amount of money, but the slaves who invested have different profits, and their reward was in proportion to them.
2. Luke must have had access to an independent version of the story.
3. Because there were two independent versions in circulation, the basic story goes back to Jesus.

B. The point of the original parable could not have been a warning that Jesus was about to return and reward the righteous and punish the wicked. The historical Jesus did not predict his return to judge the world. What would anyone have thought if Jesus when he was still alive and had not even been taken into custody predicted that he would return to judge the world?

VIII. The parable clearly contrasts the success of the slaves who started with much and the failure of the slave who started with little.

A. This contrast is obvious in the saying that both Matthew and Luke include as a moral of the story, that to those who have much, more will be given and to those who have little, even what they have will be taken away.

B. The saying is not part of the story and apparently was a separate comment by Jesus, since it also appears in the allegorical interpretation of the Parable of the Sower (see above). However, the saying clearly fits the Parable of the Talents/Pounds and confirms that we have a theme in Jesus's teaching.

C. Matthew's version of the story emphasizes that the slave who did not invest but hid the money had little in two respects.

1. He received the least amount of money.
2. He had the least ability, since the master allotted the differing

- amounts of money in proportion to the ability of the slaves.
- D. The point is not as prominent in Luke's version but surely is implied.
1. The profit that the slaves made is arranged in descending order. The first slave gained ten pounds, and the second slave gained five.
 2. The audience then expects the final slave to make even less, perhaps only one.
 3. But this minimal expectation proves too great, since the last slave made nothing.
 4. And the last slave even lost the money that he safeguarded rather than invested, since the master took it from him and gave it to the one who made ten pounds. Note that if he had invested the money and made only one pound, he would have been given control over one city!
- IX. The parable that Jesus told was primarily a warning to those who have little.
- A. The literary "law of three" sometimes applies to the parables of Jesus. If there are a series of three characters, the third character is the key to the meaning of the narrative. For another example, see the analysis of the Parable of the Good Samaritan below.
 - B. And the climax of the Parable of the Talents/Pounds is the condemnation of the slave who did not invest.
- X. Those who have little must be the sinners whom Jesus invited to share the kingdom with the righteous.
- XI. In the parable Jesus who historically called sinners and defended them against the righteous emphasized that former sinners had to struggle and grow if they were to remain in the kingdom and gain mercy at the Last Judgment. They must not fail to work with the little which they had and make it increase. Probably the parable suggested that former sinners must especially struggle against laziness and fear.
- A. At least many former sinners, such as prostitutes and corrupt tax collectors, had to make drastic changes in their lives to become part of the kingdom.
 - B. Such changes surely required courageous perseverance.
 - C. And in the parable the slave who did not invest acted out of some combination of sloth and terror.
- XII. The parable secondarily addressed the righteous reminding them that it is easier to make spiritual progress when one is already far along the path, and it is very hard when one is only beginning and is handicapped.
- XIII. I personally would apply the parable now to ministry to people recovering from substance abuse.
- A. Those of us who have never had a problem with alcohol or drugs must not be judgmental toward addicts. We do not face the problems that they must live with constantly; perhaps we cannot even imagine what it is like to be an addict.
 - B. However, addicts need to understand that, as difficult as it is to remain "clean," they must persevere, for the alternative is physical and spiritual disaster with consequences even for life after death.

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Parable of the Good Samaritan

- I. The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard appears only in Matthew 20:1-16.
- II. A summary of the parable:
 - A. Introduction: The kingdom of God is like . . .
 - B. The narrative:
 1. Early in the morning the owner went to the marketplace to hire people to work in his vineyard.
 2. The available people agreed to the wage of a denarius a day and went to the vineyard and worked.
 3. Around 9:00 AM the owner returned to the marketplace and found people standing idle, and told them to go and work, and he would pay them what was fair.
 4. Around noon and 3:00 PM the owner did the same.
 5. Around 5:00 PM the owner found still more people and asked them why they had been idle all day, and they replied that no one hired them. The owner sent them to work in the vineyard.
 6. At quitting time, the owner told his steward to pay the workers, starting with those who came last and ending with those who came first.
 7. Those who started work at 5:00 PM each received a denarius.
 8. Then those who worked all day thought that they would receive more.
 9. But they too received a denarius.
 10. They complained that the owner was treating them the same as those who worked far less.
 11. But the owner pointed out to one of them that he received the agreed wage and had no grounds for complaint. The owner had the right to do what he liked with his own money, and the worker was wrong to begrudge generosity to others.
 - C. The brief moral is that in the kingdom the first will be last and the last, first. And true to its content the moral appears both before the parable and at the end of it!
- III. The moral at the conclusion of the parable does not appear to be part of the original parable but was added later, probably by Matthew himself.
 - A. Matthew retained the saying in Mark 10:31 as the conclusion for the material just before the parable.
 - B. He then repeated the saying after the parable in an apparent attempt to explain this difficult text.
 - C. The saying does not fit the parable well, because the first workers and the last labor different numbers of hours, and this feature does not reverse; only the last workers are paid first and the first workers are paid last, and everyone received the same wage.
 - D. The saying appears apart from the parable in Mark 10:31 and Luke 13:30.
 - E. I believe that the saying itself does go back to the historical Jesus, but its

association with this parable does not.

IV. The structure of the narrative deliberately makes both the workers and the reader expect one ending and then produces shock by giving another.

A. At the beginning of the narrative the owner agreed to pay the first workers a denarius a day (apparently, the normal minimum wage) and latter the owner told other workers that he would pay them only what was fair.

B. Both the workers and the reader assumed that, as surely was customary, the wage would be proportional to the hours worked.

C. But then to everyone's shock, all the workers received the same.

D. Those who worked all day (and the reader) feel that the equal wage is unfair.

V. Consequently, the reader feels the full force of the rebuke that the owner gives to one of the workers.

VI. Since Jesus both by word and action often shocked people, the narrative must go back to him.

VII. As elsewhere in the Jewish Scriptures and the parables of Jesus, the vineyard represents Israel, and the owner is God (Isa. 5:7, Jer. 12:10, Psalm 80); see the discussion of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants below). Note that verse 8 of the parable calls the owner, "the Lord of the vineyard" (Amy-Jill Levine).

VIII. The parable clearly makes two related points (Klyne R. Snodgrass).

A. First, followers of Jesus must not begrudge God's mercy to others even when that mercy is shocking. Note that the last workers were especially undeserving because in addition to working only one hour, they made the shabby excuse that the reason that they were idle all day was that no one had hired them. If they had shown up at the marketplace earlier, the owner of the vineyard would have hired them (Joachim Jeremias).

B. Second, God is not accountable to our standards of what is fair or even what to us makes any sense.

C. I would add that we should at least recognize the appropriateness of God being merciful to those in great need, as the last workers were.

1. The plight of day workers was great even when they received a denarius a day, barely enough for subsistence.

2. With less than a denarius the workers and their dependents would not have enough to survive.

D. By implication, we, whether individually or collectively, should not allow people to fall below a certain minimal standard of living regardless of what they have done.

1. Collectively, it may be entirely ethical to put people in prison for their crimes; it is never ethical to let them die there from malnutrition.

2. Similarly, as individuals we must always pay people at least what is fair, but sometimes we must give even more when the recipients are in great need regardless of whether they somehow "deserve" it.

E. And when someone in greater need than we are receives government welfare or some special consideration from a boss, we should not grumble but ideally rejoice that someone whose need is greater than ours has been helped.

- IX. These principles fit well with the larger mission of Jesus.
- A. Jesus wanted all of Israel to become part of his movement and hoped that later the entire world would join (Matt. 8:11).
 - B. Jesus also wanted there to be basic equality among his followers and for the leaders to be servants to the lowly.
 - C. But leaders of all hierarchies try to justify their privileges by claiming to be in some way more deserving than other people.
 - D. There will always be great inequality if privileges are awarded on some notion of what is fair.
 - E. Hence, if Jesus's vision of the kingdom was to become a reality, people must not begrudge God's mercy to others and demand that God be impartial.
 - F. When Jesus promised that with the coming of his kingdom those who were presently hungry would have enough to eat (Luke 6:21), he did not limit the promise to those who were deserving.
 - G. If Jesus had succeeded in becoming king of Judea, he would have faced the daunting problem of how to balance mercy to the undeserving with the social necessity of some reward for the righteous.
 - H. As it is, we Christian successors to Jesus who in a democracy have some say in government decisions must wrestle with this problem.
- X. The Parable of the Lost Sheep has, of course, been a favorite of Christians down through the centuries who correctly interpreted it to be about
- A. God's great mercy to the lost and, by implication, God's great love for every person. Note that sometimes the Hebrew Scriptures depict God as a shepherd who takes good care of his sheep (e.g., Psalm 80:1).
 - B. God's call to us all to show mercy to the lost and to everyone.
 - C. But there was another dimension to the parable that was often forgotten.
- XI. The parable appears in three different forms, and here I will include the version in the Gospel of Thomas because of its great interest.

Matthew 18:12-14: What do you think? If some person owns a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go and seek the one which has wandered away? And if he finds it, truly I say to you that he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which did not wander away. Even so it is not the will of your father in heaven that one of these little ones be lost.

Luke 15:3-7: And he said to them this parable, "What person among you who has a hundred sheep and loses one of them does not abandon the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go for the lost until he finds it? And when he finds it, he puts it on his shoulders rejoicing. And when he comes to the house, he calls together friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, because I found my lost sheep.' I say to you even so there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous who have no need of repentance."

Thomas 107 (translated by B.M. Metzger): Jesus said, "The kingdom is like a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One of them went astray; it was the largest. He left the ninety-nine (and) sought for the one until he found it. After he had exerted himself, he said to the sheep, 'I love you more than the ninety-nine.'"

XII. In Matthew's version of the parable the lost sheep represents two groups, the lowly Christian and the sinful one.

A. Matthew places the parable in the middle of Jesus's sermon on church life (chapter 18).

B. The material right before the parable emphasizes the importance of church leaders not abusing the "little ones," that is the least prestigious members of the community.

C. The material right after the parable emphasizes the importance of forgiving sinful members of the congregation and the great lengths to which the Church must go before actually expelling a member.

D. By implication, the Parable of the Lost Sheep makes both points.

XIII. Luke, in my opinion correctly, insists that the Parable of the Lost Sheep was a defense of Jesus's ministry to tax collectors and sinners (Luke 15:1-3).

XIV. In all the versions of the parable, the lost sheep produces more joy or receives more love than the rest of the sheep which did not stray.

XV. What has often not been noticed is that the shepherd endangers the other sheep to save the lost one.

A. In all versions of the parable the shepherd abandons the other sheep, and Matthew and Luke explicitly state that the shepherd abandons the other sheep in the open country. The details of leaving the ninety-nine sheep on the "hills" or, worse, in the "wilderness" are striking and must not be dismissed as incidental or irrelevant to the overall message of the parable.

B. As Jesus surely knew being a country boy, though Matthew and Luke probably did not know or, at least, consider this, sheep abandoned in the open country would become a prey for wolves.

C. The version of the parable in Thomas tries to justify abandoning ninety-nine to save one lost by saying that the lost sheep was the largest and, by implication, the most valuable.

XVI. The basic Parable of the Lost Sheep must go back to Jesus.

A. All the versions of the parable have the same outline of a shepherd leaving ninety-nine sheep to find one and then rejoicing over the one more than over the others.

B. Yet, all of the versions differ greatly in detail and must to some extent be independent.

C. Therefore, the basic parable goes back to Jesus.

XVII. Since the shepherd endangers the ninety-nine in all surviving versions of the parable, this detail must have been in the version(s?) that Jesus himself used.

XVIII. The behavior of the shepherd is crazy; no sane shepherd would risk the lives of ninety-nine sheep to save one. There is an unintentional irony when Matthew and

Luke preface the parable with the question of what a shepherd would normally do and assume that any shepherd would abandon ninety-nine to search for one. In the original context of rural Galilee, Jesus's audience would have known that no shepherd would act this way!

XIX. Therefore, the parable makes the same points as the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard:

- A. Followers of Jesus must not resent God's great mercy to others, even when that mercy is totally undeserved. Note that the sheep gets all that love and inspires all that joy by becoming lost and needing to be found.
- B. God is not accountable to human notions about what is fair or even sane.
- C. It is appropriate for God to go to great lengths to save a sinner, since without these lengths the sinner like the lost sheep would perish.

XX. The Parable of the Lost Coin: Or what woman who has ten drachmas [a silver coin], if she loses one drachma, does she not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, because I found the drachma which I lost." Just so I say to you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

- A. This parable appears only in Luke 15:8-10.
- B. The parable occurs immediately after Luke's version of the Parable of the Lost Sheep and seems to have been modeled on it.
 - 1. The parable has the same outline as the Parable of the Lost Sheep.
 - a. A person loses something valuable.
 - b. Searches for it
 - c. Finds it and rejoices with friends and neighbors.
 - d. The moral for both parables in Luke is similar, namely, heaven rejoices over the repentance of a sinner.
 - 2. Even much of the actual wording is identical.
 - 3. Luke underlines the similarities by introducing the second parable with the word, "or."
- C. There are only two possible explanations for these detailed similarities.
 - 1. Luke placed the same personal stamp on two different parables that Jesus told.
 - 2. Luke composed the Parable of the Lost Coin himself using his version of the Parable of the Lost Sheep as a model.
- D. A frequent pattern in Luke's Gospel is that a passage about a woman follows immediately after a passage about a man. For example, the gospel narrative begins with the Angel Gabriel appearing to Zachariah and then appearing to Mary.
- E. The adjoining parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin follow this pattern.
 - 1. A man searches for a lost sheep.
 - 2. A woman searches for a lost coin.
- F. It is noteworthy that the Parable of the Lost Coin does not have the

disturbing feature of heaven rejoicing *more* over a repentant sinner than over the righteous, a feature that Luke retained in the Parable of the Lost Sheep and certainly goes back to Jesus.

G. Therefore, it seems to me likely that Luke composed the Parable of the Lost Coin himself to

1. Reinforce the message in the Parable of the Lost Sheep that God rejoices over repentant sinners
2. Continue the pattern of a story about a woman following a story about a man.

H. Luke's frequent pairing of material about a man with material about a woman reminds us that

1. The historical Jesus had an openness to the gifts of women and even had women disciples, a practice that seems unparalleled in his social world.
2. Women have always been especially numerous in the church, even if their presence was often not honored. Already in the second century a Pagan writer dismissed Christianity as a religion primarily of women, and at least in the churches where I have served, the majority of people were female!

XXI. The Parable of the Good Samaritan appears only in Luke 10:30-35.

XXII. The Parable occurs as part of a larger discussion between Jesus and a Jewish lawyer. Here is an outline of the entire unit (Luke 10:25-10:37):

A. The introduction to the parable:

1. To test Jesus, a "lawyer" asks what he needs to do to inherit eternal life.
2. Jesus asks the lawyer what he thinks is the answer given in the Torah.
3. The lawyer responds to love God with one's whole being and to love one's neighbor as oneself.
4. Jesus says that the answer is correct and the lawyer will find life by following it.
5. But "to justify himself" the lawyer asks who is his neighbor, and Jesus replies with

B. The Parable of the Good Samaritan:

1. A man going from Jerusalem to Jericho was assaulted by bandits who left him naked and half dead on the road. Note: The text does not specify the ethnic identity of the man, but since the location of the incident was between Jerusalem and Jericho, the natural assumption would be that he was Jewish.
2. A priest and a Levite (assistant priest) passed by without helping. Note: The parable does not give any explanation for this egregious ethical lapse, and perhaps no explanation is needed. But several things are worth pointing out:
 - a. The popular view that the priest and the Levite were concerned

with preserving their ritual purity which would have been negated by contact with a corpse is dubious.

1). The victim was still alive.

2). Even if the priest and Levite thought he might be dead, attending to the dead would have taken ethical precedence over preserving purity (Amy-Jill Levine).

b. Since bandits might still have been in the vicinity, taking time to deal with the victim would have been risky.

3. A Samaritan arrived and provided the needed assistance in an exemplary way.

C. Conclusion to Jesus's encounter with the lawyer.

1. Jesus asks the lawyer who he thinks acted as neighbor to the victim.

2. The lawyer responds, "the one who acted mercifully" (Luke 10:37).

3. Jesus tells the lawyer, "You go and do likewise."

XXIII. I believe that Luke wrote the material surrounding the actual parable in an attempt to reconstruct a plausible setting for the parable, and we should not rely on this material to determine what the historical Jesus intended by the parable itself.

A. It is most unlikely that a detailed discussion between Jesus and a lawyer would have been preserved for decades in the oral tradition before Luke recorded it.

B. Luke's reconstruction is both brilliant and edifying and even presents helpful insights into the meaning of the parable.

C. But any conclusions as to what *Jesus* was intending in the parable must be based primarily on the content of the parable itself rather than Luke's speculative commentary.

XXIV. Like the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, the Parable of the Good Samaritan made the original audience expect one ending and then produced shock with another.

A. A Jewish audience hearing the first part of the parable would have assumed that after the priest and the Levite failed to help the victim, a Jewish layman would provide the needed assistance.

B. But then the parable shocked the audience by having a Samaritan provide exemplary assistance.

1. Jews and Samaritans in the time of Jesus normally hated one another. There was a long history of bitter antagonism and even violence. For example, in 128 BCE the Jewish ruler John Hyrcanus destroyed the Samaritan Temple. And in John's Gospel, the enemies of Jesus insult him as having a demon and being a "Samaritan" (John 8:48).

2. Presumably because of this long history, Jews must have regarded Samaritans in general as unethical.

3. The Parable shocked the Jewish audience by having the Samaritan even put a wounded Jew on the Samaritan's own mount, take him to an inn, and pay the innkeeper to continue caring for him.

XXV. The parable challenged the original hearers to accept the possibility that a

Samaritan could be ethical and to consider whether they and Samaritans could be friends.

XXVI. The invitation to regard Samaritans as friends was in keeping with Jesus's ultimate goal of reuniting the twelve tribes of Israel in his new kingdom (Matt. 19:28). The Samaritans were the surviving remnant of Israel's ten northern tribes, a fact that the Jews did not normally acknowledge.

XXVII. We may note in passing that Luke clearly understood what the primary message of the parable originally was.

A. Luke introduces the parable with the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself followed by a question from a Jewish Lawyer, "Who is my neighbor?"

B. Immediately after the parable Jesus asks who actually was neighbor to the Jewish man who was assaulted by the bandits. The Jewish lawyer has to respond that it was the one who showed mercy, even though the lawyer apparently still cannot acknowledge that the exemplary neighbor was a Samaritan.

C. Luke's point is clear: Samaritans were the neighbors of Jews, and Jews needed to fulfill God's commandment by loving them and welcoming them into God's Kingdom.

D. Within the larger context of Luke-Acts, the parable helps prepare the reader for Samaritans joining the church (Acts 8:4-25). Later, of course, Gentiles will also join. It is noteworthy that

1. Luke never suggests that Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles should give up their differing cultures,
2. But instead assumes that in the church different groups can live together in love and peace because they have the same Lord and share in the same Holy Spirit.

XXVIII. Of course, it is true that a timeless message of the parable is that we should imitate the Samaritan's kindness to a wounded traveler and thereby gain eternal life.

A. Luke makes this point explicitly when he ends the section with Jesus telling the lawyer, "Go and do likewise."

B. The historical Jesus clearly assumed the point, because if the Samaritan's behavior was not exemplary, the Samaritan would not be a deserving friend and neighbor.

XXIX. Today the parable is especially a warning against accepting negative stereotypes about racial, religious, or ethnic groups and an invitation to consider the possibility of reconciliation with our nation's or our religion's present enemies.

XXX. An interesting permissible point of the parable is that when we are in great need we may receive help from people we normally despise, and we should be humble enough to accept such help and allow ourselves to reconsider our attitude toward them.

The Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat and the Parable of the Net

- I. The Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat appears only in Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 in the New Testament gospels.
- II. A summary of the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43).
 - A. Introduction: The kingdom of God may be compared to . . .
 - B. Narrative:
 - 1. A man sowed good seed in his field.
 - 2. While people were sleeping, his enemy sowed weeds (literally, darnel) among the wheat.
 - 3. When the wheat spouted and produced grain, the weeds also appeared.
 - 4. The man's slaves asked him why there were weeds, and he replied that an enemy was responsible.
 - 5. The slaves asked if he wanted them to gather the weeds.
 - 6. He said that if they gathered the weeds, they would also uproot the wheat.
 - 7. Instead, the slaves were to let both the weeds and wheat grow together.
 - 8. At harvest time he would instruct the reapers to collect the weeds and burn them and put the wheat into the barn.
 - C. An allegorical explanation given to the disciples in private.
 - 1. The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Humanity (that is Jesus himself).
 - 2. The field is the world.
 - 3. The good seed is the "sons of the kingdom," and the bad seed is the "sons of the evil one."
 - 4. The enemy who sowed the bad seed is the devil.
 - 5. The harvest is the end of the age.
 - 6. The reapers are angels.
 - D. Moral: How it will be at the last judgment.
 - 1. At the end of the age, the Son of Humanity will send out his angels.
 - 2. The angels will gather from the kingdom all who do evil "and throw them into the furnace of fire" where "there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 13:42).
 - 3. The righteous will shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom.
- III. The basic parable without the allegorical explanation in private apparently goes back to Jesus and was a defense of his mission to sinners.
 - A. The parable presupposes that the kingdom is a mixture of good and bad people and fits well with Jesus's mission to save sinners.
 - B. The parable probably was a defense of that mission. The critics of Jesus were saying that he had no moral standards, since he not only welcomed sinners into his movement but even continued to tolerate their presence when they kept sinning.
 - C. An additional indication that the parable goes back to Jesus is a telltale craziness which reminds us that the ways of God sometimes do not fit what is

reasonable in human affairs.

1. A human farmer would not let the weeds grow until the harvest, because the weeds would compete with the wheat. Instead, a human farmer would uproot the weeds immediately.
2. As we have seen and will see, in many parables (e.g., the Laborers in the Vineyard) characters act weirdly and are a reminder that God is not accountable to what makes sense to us.

IV. The parable has several major points.

- A. It would be a mistake to try to purify Jesus's movement by expelling bad people, because inevitably good people would be expelled too.
- B. God would separate the good and evil at the last judgment, and the evil would be appropriately punished.
- C. Those who were not living up to the message of the gospel needed to repent to avoid condemnation at the last judgment.

V. The allegorical explanation probably did not come from Jesus. The fact that Matthew records that the parable was public (Matt. 13:34) and the allegorical explanation was private (Matt. 13:36) suggests that the explanation was a later interpretation that the risen Jesus gave to the Church. I suspect that it came from Matthew himself. Note that “wailing and gnashing of teeth” at the last judgment is a refrain in Matthew (Matt. 8:12, 13:42, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30) and an indication of his editorial work.

VI. Moreover, the allegorical explanation had a dualism between Christians and non-Christians that did not exist during the ministry of Jesus but instead reflected later polarization due to persecution.

- A. Jesus invited all Jews to become part of his movement and, according to my reconstruction of the history, hoped to become a king through popular support.
- B. By contrast, when Matthew wrote, the Pharisees were persecuting the Church, and Jewish Christians were under pressure to abandon Christianity.
- C. Consequently, with the allegorical explanation the parable was no longer about whether the church should allow sinners to remain in its midst.
- D. Instead, the allegorical explanation draws a drastic distinction between those in the church and those outside.
 1. The “field” in the allegory is not the “kingdom” but the “world.”
 2. And the weeds are children of the “evil one” (that is, the Devil).

VII. The primary message now is that those outside the church and, perhaps especially those who once were members and then abandoned the church, will suffer disaster at the last judgment.

- A. At the last judgment non-Christians will be cast in the furnace where there will be “wailing and gnashing of teeth.”
- B. Those inside the Church will shine like the sun.
- C. A similar message occurs elsewhere in the New Testament, perhaps especially in the Book of Hebrews (e.g., Hebrews 10:24-31).

VIII. The Parable of the Net appears only in Matthew 13:47-50 in the New Testament

gospels.

IX. A summary of the Parable:

A. Introduction: The kingdom of God is like . . .

B. The narrative:

1. A dragnet was cast into the sea and gathered all kinds of fish.

2. When it was full, people stored the good fish and discarded the bad.

Note: Biblical law mandated that only fish with fins and scales could be eaten (Lev. 11:9-12); all other aquatic animals were forbidden.

C. The moral:

1. "So it will be at the completion of the age."

2. The angels will separate the evil from the righteous.

3. The angels will throw the evil "into the furnace of fire" where "there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

X. In its present form the parable with this moral primarily stresses the punishment that the wicked will have to endure ("wailing and gnashing of teeth" in the "furnace of fire" [Matt. 13:50]) and by implication, the need for the wicked to repent. There is nothing explicit about the rewards of the righteous.

XI. The moral here is similar to the moral in the nearby Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat. Even many of the words are identical.

XII. Because of the identical wording, I suspect that Matthew added the moral.

XIII. The clear parallelism between the Parable of the Net and the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat suggests that the original Parable of the Net also made the point that it would be a mistake to try to purify the Church now by expelling sinners. The original parable clearly

A. Emphasized that the net gathered all kinds of fish. Translation: There are people of various degrees of goodness and badness among the followers of Jesus.

B. *It was only when the net was full* that the bad fish were discarded.

C. Consequently, it would be a mistake now to eliminate the bad fish.

D. God will take care of that at the last judgment.

The Parable of the Merciless Creditor and the Parable of the Two Debtors

I. The Parable of the Merciless Creditor appears only in Matthew 18:23-35.

II. A Summary of the parable:

A. Introduction: The kingdom of God may be compared to . . .

B. Narrative: A king decided to settle accounts with his slaves.

1. A slave was brought forward who owed ten thousand talents (a staggering sum).

2. Since the slave was not able to repay, the king ordered that the slave and his family and his possessions be sold for repayment.

3. The slave begged for time, promising to repay everything.

4. The king was compassionate and cancelled the loan.

5. The slave went out and found a fellow slave who owed him a hundred

denarii (minimum wage for a hundred days).

6. The slave aggressively demanded repayment.

7. The fellow slave begged for time, promising to repay.

8. The slave threw his fellow slave in prison until the debt would be repaid.

9. When the king's other slaves saw what happened, they were greatly distressed and told the king.

10. The king summoned the slave and said to him that he should have had mercy on his fellow slave as the king had had mercy on him.

11. In anger the king had the slave tortured until he repaid everything.

C. The moral: God will do the same to each of you "if you do not forgive your brother from your hearts" (Matt. 18:35).

III. In Matthew the parable is a response to a question from Peter of how often he should forgive a "brother" (fellow disciple) who sins against him.

IV. In this context supplemented by the moral in Matthew the primary point of the parable is that Christians must forgive one another from "the heart" if they expect God to continue forgiving them. Here the "heart" means the core of one's being and forgiveness from the heart means total and unconditional forgiveness.

V. Consequently, the traditional title of the story is the "Parable of the Unforgiving Servant."

VI. However, there are good reasons to doubt that the need to forgive each other was originally the *primary* message of the parable.

A. Forgiving one another is an important theme in Matthew's Gospel. After giving us the Our Father as the model for prayer, Matthew comments, "If you do not forgive people, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:15).

B. But nothing in the *parable* itself concerns forgiving "from the heart."

C. Therefore, it seems likely that Matthew has imposed his own agenda.

VII. I regard Matthew's interpretation to be only a permissible meaning of the parable that Jesus told. It is permissible to use the parable to admonish people to give up their resentments toward one another, especially since in Aramaic, the language of Jesus, sin and debt are the same word. But the primary point of the parable which Jesus told must be elsewhere.

VIII. Of course, since Matthew's interpretation is part of the New Testament Matthew's interpretation is authoritative for Christians.

IX. To me the most interesting and helpful part of Matthew's interpretation is that people who refuse to forgive others will be tortured until they do, and I would apply this insight psychologically and socially.

A. Matthew stresses that the king (who allegorically stands for God) ordered the servant who cruelly refused to forgive to be tortured.

B. I do not think that Matthew is implying that God is sadistic.

C. Instead, Matthew realizes what is common human experience that lack of forgiveness from the heart makes people live in resentment.

D. Resentment imprisons and tortures us, by focusing us on the negative, using

up valuable energy that could be used constructively, and constantly straining relationships.

E. Individuals and groups that actively *nurse* resentment easily become both miserable and destructive.

F. Matthew believes that one end result is condemnation at the last judgment, and I fear that he is correct.

X. The parable that Jesus told concerns being merciful or not being merciful with people *who cannot repay their financial obligations*.

XI. Consequently, I prefer the title, “The Parable of the Merciless Creditor.”

XII. Unlike today, in the ancient world and, especially in rural areas like Galilee where Jesus lived, poor people normally borrowed money only when they were in desperate need.

A. In modern capitalistic cultures, people of all classes often borrow money in order to make more money. For example, impoverished students take out loans in hopes of getting an education which will lead to a prosperous career.

B. In ancient times there was little social mobility, and the poor seldom had an opportunity to improve their lot significantly.

C. Instead, the poor struggled not to lose the little that they had and only in times of crisis resorted to borrowing money to survive. Borrowing money only as a last resort would have been especially true of peasants who comprised the majority of the population in rural Galilee (Douglas Oakman).

XIII. Therefore, the Bible urges people to be generous in lending (Psalm 37:26) and forbids charging interest on loans to members of the community (Exod. 22:25).

XIV. Jesus had a special concern for the poor and hoped that the movement which he was starting would alleviate their lot. Thus, he

A. Predicted that the poor and the hungry would be better off in the kingdom (Luke 6:20-21).

B. Urged the rich who wished to join his movement to give their surpluss to the poor, and promised that those who did so would have treasure in heaven (Mark 10:21).

C. In line with the preaching of John the Baptist (Luke 3:11), wanted his followers in general to share with those who were in need (Matt. 5:42).

XV. Jesus specifically urged his followers to “lend, expecting nothing in return” (Luke 6:35).

XVI. The primary point of Jesus's Parable of the Merciless Creditor is that his followers are accountable to God for how they treat people who need to borrow from them.

A. The parable is an allegory.

1. The king is God.

2. The slave who owes ten thousand talents is a disciple of Jesus, who like every person owes everything to God.

3. The fellow slave is a needy disciple who is in debt and cannot presently repay.

B. The primary point of the parable is for followers of Jesus to be financially

generous and patient with members of the community who must borrow from them to survive. God will punish those who have the financial resources to help the desperate and yet refuse to do so.

XVII. An important modern implication of the parable is that wealthy nations and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and international banks should also be generous and patient with poor nations burdened by debt.

XVIII. The brief Parable of the Two Debtors appears only in Luke 7:41-42.

A. The narrative: "A creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other, fifty. Since they could not repay, he cancelled both debts."

B. The moral: "Which of them will love him more?" with the implied answer that the one who had the greater debt will.

XIX. In Luke's Gospel, the parable is part of a larger story (Luke 7:36-50).

A. A Pharisee asked Jesus to eat with him, and Jesus entered the house and prepared to dine.

B. A sinful woman knew that Jesus was there and brought a jar of ointment and

weeping began to wet his feet with her tears and wipe them off with her hair and kiss his feet and anoint them with ointment.

C. The Pharisee thought that if Jesus was a prophet he would have known that the woman was a sinner.

D. Jesus in response told the Pharisee the parable quoted above, and the Pharisee gave the implied answer that the debtor for whom the creditor cancelled the larger sum would love the creditor more, and Jesus agreed.

E. Jesus said that the woman had treated him better than his host had.

1. The host had not given Jesus water for his feet or kissed him or anointed his head with olive oil.

2. The woman wet his feet with her tears and had kept fervently kissing his feet and had anointed them with ointment.

F. Jesus said that her many sins had been forgiven, and, consequently, she loved much.

G. "But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

H. The other diners wondered who Jesus could be since he even forgives sins.

I. Jesus told the woman that her sins were forgiven, that her faith had saved her, and to go in peace.

XX. In the context of the larger story, the Parable of the Two Debtors clearly

A. Reassures repentant sinners that despite their past they may in their love for God surpass those who have always been righteous.

B. Reminds the righteous not to look down on repentant sinners, especially since the first and great commandment is to love God with all one's heart.

C. Defends the shameless mercy of God even to the undeserving, since such mercy can easily produce such wonderful results.

XXI. I would also apply the parable to personal psychology. The part of our personalities that we most dislike will be the part of us that loves God the most if we

allow God to love it and let us accept it.

XXII. I believe that Luke himself composed the beautiful story that surrounds the Parable of the Two Debtors.

A. It is most unlikely that the oral tradition would have retained the complex details of this narrative for at least half a century.

B. The story is full of Lukan themes.

1. Luke's gospel has other passages in which God or Jesus defends a woman who has been criticized by humans.

a. When Elizabeth says that her son will be named John, people criticize her, but the reader knows that the Angel Gabriel previously said that he would be called John, and then John's Father confirms in writing that the child is John, and the father's mouth is miraculously opened (Luke 1:13, 59-64).

b. When Martha complains that her sister Mary should help her rather than sitting at Jesus's feet and listening to him, Jesus defends Mary (Luke 10:38-42).

c. When the women who went to the tomb report that Jesus has risen from the dead, the male disciples dismiss the report as nonsense. But the reader knows that Jesus has risen, and soon Jesus appears to the men thereby confirming the women's report (Luke 24).

2. In the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (to be further discussed below) we have another contrast between a judgmental Pharisee and repentant sinner in which Jesus commends the sinner (Luke 18:9-14).

3. Forgiveness is a major theme throughout Luke-Acts (in Acts: 2:38, 3:19, 5:31, 7:60, 8:22, 10:43, 13:38-39, 26:18).

C. We have already seen how in the story of Jesus's birth Luke started with a few pre-existent things (a tradition that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the historical fact that Jesus was from Nazareth, and Luke's own concerns for the poor) and then Luke used his imagination to produce the familiar narrative of Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem to register, Jesus being laid in a manger, and adored by shepherds.

D. I would suggest that a similar evolution took place with the story of the Pharisee and the sinful woman.

1. Luke began with the Parable of the Two Debtors which in fact Jesus historically did tell.

2. Luke then imagined a context in which this parable would have been appropriate.

3. And he produced the story of the Pharisee and the Sinful Woman.

XXIII. In the ministry of Jesus the primary meaning of the parable was that the poor should be grateful to creditors who write off loans to them, and that those who make loans should be generous to those in great need, since the latter will be supremely grateful.

XXIV. The Parable of the Two Debtors complemented the Parable of the Merciless

Creditor.

- A. The Parable of the Merciless Creditor emphasized the dire fate of those who insisted on immediate payment of debts from people already in desperate financial straits.
- B. The Parable of the Two Debtors emphasized the great reward of creditors who cancel the debts of those already impoverished.

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector and The Parable of the Loving Father and His Two Sons and the Parable of the Two Sons

I. The Parable of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee appears only in Luke 18:9-14.

II. A summary of the Parable:

- A. An introduction: Jesus told this parable to those who thought that they were righteous and despised others.
- B. The narrative:
 - 1. A Pharisee and a tax collector went to the Temple to pray.
 - 2. The Pharisee thanked God that he was superior to others, including the tax collector, since the Pharisee fasted regularly and paid tithes on everything.
 - 3. The tax collector humbly asked God to be merciful to a sinner.
- C. Two morals:
 - 1. The tax collector was justified, and the Pharisee was not.
 - 2. "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

III. It is striking that Luke or his source felt it was necessary have an introduction and two morals lest we misinterpret the parable. Had there been a different interpretation?

IV. The introduction and the two morals probably do not go back to Jesus.

- A. The introduction does not even claim to go back to Jesus.
- B. The first moral begins with "I tell you," and grammatically the antecedent of the "I" is unclear and could be either Jesus or Luke himself.
- C. Even if the intended antecedent is probably Jesus, Luke could have added, "I tell you."
- D. Apparently, Jesus usually did not supply morals to his parables, or, at least, the morals he did supply were lost (see above).
- E. The second moral cited above appears elsewhere in Luke (14:11) and in a different context in Matthew (23:12) and probably was a separate saying of Jesus which was later attached to this parable.

V. In Luke's Gospel the parable is

- A. A defense of Jesus's ministry to sinners
- B. A timeless exhortation to humility and reliance on God's mercy rather than on one's own self-promotion.
- C. A warning against despising outcasts.

- D. Part of Luke's condemnation of Pharisees who after the resurrection persecuted Christians.
 - E. And even a presentation of part of Luke's theology of prayer: True prayer is directed primarily to God, whereas feigned prayer is primarily directed to oneself.
- VI. In the context of the historical Jesus the parable was both
- A. A defense of Jesus's ministry to sinners. Luke is correct on this point.
 - B. A recognition that Jesus's critics had some virtues and an appeal to these "righteous" to support Jesus's outreach to sinners and enter a kingdom in which all were welcome.
- VII. We may also suspect that in the original parable the Pharisee was not self-centered.
- A. The oral tradition would only have preserved the basic outline of the parable, and the details would be added on each telling.
 - B. In the basic outline the Pharisee's prayer would only have consisted of thanking God for his virtues.
 - C. A parable portraying a Pharisee as self-centered would have alienated Pharisees and hindered Jesus's invitation to them to join the kingdom.
 - D. Moreover, there is considerable evidence that the historical Jesus had some respect for the Pharisees and that it was only after the resurrection that Christian tradition began to portray them as hypocrites.
 - 1. Pharisees invited Jesus to dinner, as Luke himself remembers (Luke 7:36, 11:37, 14:1), and Pharisees warned Jesus of a plot against him (Luke 13:31).
 - 2. When Jesus insisted that he did not come to call the righteous but sinners (Mark 2:16-17), he implicitly acknowledged the goodness of his religious critics, including the Pharisees.
 - 3. However, beginning with Saul of Tarsus (later, Saint Paul) the Pharisees persecuted the Church.
 - 4. In response, Christian writers, including the evangelists Matthew and John, portrayed the Pharisees as hopeless hypocrites.
 - 5. We should assume that the oral tradition had a similar response.
 - 6. Modern scholarship on ancient Judaism has shown that
 - a. Religious debate at the time of the New Testament tended to be polemical in general and exaggerated the failings of opponents. Compare contemporary politics and much religion in the United States!
 - b. Judaism was at least not more hypocritical than religion usually is.
 - E. Perhaps Jesus's only serious criticisms of the Pharisees were
 - 1. Their understandable reluctance to accept Jesus's claim that he was inaugurating a messianic kingdom.
 - 2. Their refusal to respect former sinners who were entering the kingdom. Note that some of these sinners must have backslid.

F. Let us see whether Jesus's longest parable confirms the suspicion that the original version of the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector could have been less critical of the Pharisees.

VIII. The Parable of the Loving Father and His Two Sons only appears in Luke 15:11-32.

IX. The proper title for the parable.

A. Luke 15:11-32 has traditionally been called the “Parable of the Prodigal Son.”

B. This title reflects the position of the parable after two parables about the recovery of something lost, the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin.

C. Because of this position, it is natural to focus on the recovery of the lost son in the subsequent parable.

D. Since the son got into trouble for greed and wasteful spending, “Prodigal Son” seemed appropriate as a title.

E. Nevertheless, the parable itself focuses almost equally on three different characters.

1. The first section of the parable (15:11-24) focuses on the younger son and the father.

2. The second section (15:25-32) focuses on the older son and the father.

F. And the introduction to the parable, “A certain man had two sons,” makes it clear that the rest of the story will feature all three.

G. Therefore, like many scholars I would prefer a title that alludes to all three characters.

H. Hence, my title is, “The Parable of the Loving Father and His Two Sons.”

X. A summary of the Parable:

A. The younger son asked his father to give him his share of the inheritance, and the father divided his assets between his two sons.

B. The younger son went to a distant land where he squandered the money.

C. When the money was gone, a severe famine occurred, and the younger son began to be in need.

D. He took a job feeding pigs and suffered extreme hunger.

E. When he came to his senses, he realized that he would have to return home and admit that he had behaved sinfully and could no longer expect to be treated as a son. Instead, he would ask for his father to treat him as a hired servant.

F. So he went, but before he arrived at the house, his father saw him, had compassion on him, and ran to him and embraced him.

G. After the son started to confess his past sinful behavior and that he no longer deserved to be treated as a son, the father stopped listening.

H. Instead, the father ordered the servants to dress him up and prepare a feast to celebrate his son's return.

I. And the party began.

J. Meanwhile, the older brother approached the house and heard the celebration and asked a servant what was happening.

- K. The servant said that his brother had returned and that the father ordered the celebration because he got his son back in good health.
- L. The older brother became angry and was not willing to go in.
- M. The father came out and entreated him.
- N. The elder son responded that he had served the father for years always following his orders, and the father never gave him even a goat to party with his friends.
- O. But when “this son of yours who has consumed your living with prostitutes came, you killed for him the fattened calf.”
- P. The father replied that everything that he had now belonged to the older son. But it was necessary to party because “this your brother . . . was lost and has been found.”
- XI. The basic parable must go back to Jesus, since it so clearly fit his ministry. Like the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (see above) the parable was both
 - A. A defense of Jesus's association with disreputable people, symbolized by the younger son.
 - B. An appeal to the righteous people to join the kingdom of God which was open to all. The appeal of the father to the elder brother to attend the party symbolized God appealing to the righteous to join the disreputable in the kingdom that Jesus was proclaiming. Note that Jesus's favorite and distinctive title for God was “Father.”
- XII. The basic parable confirms the suspicion (see above) that Jesus did not condemn the Pharisees as hopeless hypocrites.
 - A. The older son represented the righteous, including the Pharisees.
 - B. The parable portrays the son as faithful to his father, never disobeying his command.
 - C. Symbolically, this faithful following of the father's commandments implied faithfulness in following *God's* commandments. Note that Jesus used the metaphor of father to describe God and even addressed God as “Father.”
 - D. The parable's only criticism of the older son is his refusal to honor his father's wishes to accept the younger brother back into the family.
 - E. Symbolically, this refusal was not accepting God's wishes for the righteous to join the kingdom and be reconciled to the former sinners in it.
- XIII. Much of the wording and many of the parable's details must come from Luke.
 - A. This is the longest of Jesus's parables.
 - B. It is also a literary masterpiece.
 - 1. With astonishing brevity, the personalities of the three principal characters are clearly sketched.
 - 2. The narrative is full of moving details, such as the degradation of a Jewish man having to feed pigs or the switch between the older brother dismissing his sibling as “this son of yours” and the father correcting him with “this your brother.”
 - 3. The balance between the two halves of the story is beautiful.
 - 4. The ambiguous ending leaves the reader/hearer to decide whether the

older brother will heed the Father's (God's) plea, and the righteous whom the older brother symbolizes must also decide whether they are going to join God's kingdom.

C. It is most unlikely that as the parable was heard and repeated orally for decades, these brilliant and subtle literary details would have been retained.

D. Instead, they must have come from Luke. Note that elsewhere Luke also crafts stories with great literary skill (e.g., the Walk to Emmaus [Luke 24:13-35]).

XIV. As the longest of Jesus's parables it would be a suitable place to review many of the themes in the shorter parables, and in fact it does.

A. The first part of the parable parallels the Parables of the Dishonest Steward and the Unjust Judge.

1. Like those deplorable characters the younger son was completely selfish.

a. By asking for his inheritance while his father was still alive and then taking the money and going abroad, the son disowned his father completely.

b. The son then squandered the total sum, though whether he spent it on prostitutes, as the jealous older brother imagined, is not stated.

2. Then like the dishonest steward and the unjust judge, the younger son realistically assessed his situation and for totally selfish reasons decided to do the right thing.

a. He realized that he would starve if he remained where he was.

b. Therefore, he decided to go home, confess his sin, and offer to work as a hired servant.

c. Note that the parable leaves open the question of whether the son truly repented of his sin *against his father* or only pretended to do so.

1). Since Luke placed this parable after the two short parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin which (according to Luke) celebrate God's joy over a sinner who repents, he apparently believed that the younger son's repentance was genuine.

2). But since the dishonest steward and the unjust judge certainly did not repent, we should not assume that the younger son must have.

3). Perhaps the most balanced perspective is that when one hits bottom due to one's own sin and realizes what a mistake one has made, one has taken the *first major step* toward *full* repentance.

3. Like the dishonest steward, the younger son ended up very well. His father joyfully received him and had a party to celebrate.

4. The implicit moral is similar to that of the other two parables: It is all

right to be completely selfish, provided that one is wise enough to see what is truly in one's self-interest. Note how much the younger son suffered before he came to his senses.

B. The first part of the parable of the Loving Father and His Two Sons also parallels the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Unlike the dishonest steward and the unjust judge, but like the tax collector, the younger son realized that he had behaved sinfully, deserved nothing, and he only asked the father (symbolically, God) for mercy. His humble request was to be treated as a hired hand.

C. The Parable of the Father and the Two Sons also is very similar to the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.

1. The first half of the parable makes us expect one ending, and then the second half shocks us with another.
 - a. After the younger son's disgraceful behavior, he assumes that the most that he can ask for is to be treated as a hired servant.
 - b. Consequently, the parable invites the reader to wonder whether or not this offer will be accepted.
 - c. But instead of accepting or rejecting the offer, the father joyfully acknowledges him as his son.
2. The authority figure graciously showered special favor on the least deserving.
 - a. In the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, the owner paid those who worked one hour as much as those who worked all day.
 - b. In the Parable of the Loving Father and His Two Sons, the father who never gave even a goat to his dutiful older son, celebrated the younger son's return with a fattened calf.
3. Just as the laborers who worked all day complained about the owner's generosity to those who worked only one hour, the older brother bitterly complained about the father's graciousness to the undeserving younger son.
4. The implicit morals for both parables are the same.
 - a. Followers of Jesus must not begrudge God's merciful generosity to others, even if that generosity is extravagant and completely undeserved.
 - b. God is not accountable to our standards of what is fair or even what to us makes any sense.

XV. Yet, the Parable of the Loving Father and the Two Sons makes a fundamental theological advance by emphasizing that salvation is primarily being in loving relationship with God and others.

A. In the other parables mentioned above, the relationship is contractual.

B. But in the Parable of the Loving Father and His Two Sons, the relationship is familial.

C. The father loved both his sons, and he challenged his older son to treat the younger son as a brother.

- D. An older brother ideally finds joy in the good fortune of another member of the family and celebrates it.
 - E. So too, a child ideally rejoices in the happiness of its father.
 - F. Hence, perhaps the greatest moral of this parable is that all followers of Jesus are called to find their joy especially in the joy of God and in the joy of others, since God is our Father and everyone else is our brother or sister.
- XVI. Therefore, the Parable of the Loving Father and His Two Sons makes it clear that there are great rewards for the righteous despite God's extravagant generosity to sinners. In the parable the older brother
- A. Will inherit all of the remaining property ("All that is mine is yours").
 - B. Gets invited to attend a lavish party in which a fattened calf is on the menu (note the older brother's previous complaint that the father had never even given him a goat to celebrate with his friends).
 - C. Never suffered the hunger and degradation that the younger brother endured because of his irresponsibility.
 - D. Gets to rejoice that his younger brother has returned to the family.
- XVII. I believe that the Parable of the Loving Father and His Two Sons has important permissible applications to individual psychology.
- A. The two brothers correspond well to two different aspects of an individual's psychology.
 - 1. The younger brother corresponds to the part of our personalities which passionately wants to be free of the restraints of parents and society, the part of our personalities that wants to act naturally, to be genuine, to be oneself.
 - 2. The older brother corresponds to the part of our personalities that wishes to impose social control over oneself and others, to make oneself and others live up to the expectations of family and society.
 - B. As the Parable of the Loving Father and His Two Sons suggests, these two parts of an individual's psychology do not normally get along well.
 - 1. The part of our psychology that needs to be free resents the part of us that wishes to impose social discipline.
 - 2. The part of us that wishes to impose social values regards the part of us that wants to be free as stupid and irresponsible.
 - C. The parable suggests that if we accept that God (the father) loves both parts of us, the two aspects of our personality can value each other and become friends and live together in peace.
- XVIII. The Parable of the Two Sons appears only in Matthew 21:28-32.
- XIX. The setting of the Parable in Matthew is a confrontation between Jesus and the chief priests after Jesus has conducted a semi-violent protest in the Temple.
- XX. A summary of the parable:
- A. Introduction by Jesus to his audience of chief priests and elders: "What do you think?"
 - B. Narrative:

1. A man had two sons.
 2. He asked the first to go and work in the vineyard.
 3. The son initially refused, but later he changed his mind and went.
 4. The father also asked the other son to go and work in the vineyard.
 5. The other son said that he would, and yet he did not go.
- C. Concluding question and reply.
1. Question from Jesus, "Which of the two did the father's will?"
 2. Reply from the audience: "The first."
- D. Application: "The tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of God ahead of you."
1. When John the Baptist preached righteousness, the tax collectors and prostitutes believed.
 2. But you did not.
- XXI. The application does not fit the parable well.
- A. The parable contrasts those who do the father's (that is, God's) will and those who do not. And the parable illustrates doing God's will by working in a vineyard.
- B. But the application focuses not on deeds but on faith. The tax collectors and prostitutes *believed*.
- XXII. I think that the application does go back to Jesus.
- A. Jesus certainly condemned righteous Jews who did not believe in his announcement that he was beginning God's kingdom.
- B. And Jesus appealed to John the Baptist to get people to believe.
1. John the Baptist was apparently more popular than Jesus, and his ascetic lifestyle was not open to moral condemnation unlike Jesus's celebratorial one.
 2. John had prophesied the coming of the Messiah, and Jesus proclaimed that he himself was the fulfillment of the prophecy.
 3. Jesus praised John as the greatest of those born by women, and this praise must have commended him to those who revered the Baptist (Matt. 11:11).
- C. Jesus did not condemn the *deeds* of his righteous critics but their closed mindedness and judgmental attitudes which made it impossible to accept Jesus's messianic ministry to sinners.
- D. The early Church would not have invented a saying that made believing in *John the Baptist* a condition for entering the kingdom (Klyne Snodgrass).
- XXIII. Consequently, I suspect that Matthew began with two different authentic sayings of Jesus, one about believing and one about doing, and combined them thereby producing the parable and the application.
- XXIV. Matthew inserted the resulting block of material into the confrontation between Jesus and the temple authorities. Because the Pharisees persecuted the Early Church, by the time Matthew was writing Christians assumed that the Jewish leadership even in Jesus's time was totally hypocritical and even their deeds were displeasing to God (see Matt. 23).

XXV. Originally the Parable of the Two Sons was a more general comparison of people who promise to do something and then do not do it versus those who initially refuse to do something and yet later do it.

XXVI. The point of the parable is that the latter are better.

A. Both sons misled the father.

B. But the first son did not do the father's will, whereas the second ultimately did.

XXVII. The parable fits well into Jesus's general condemnation of hypocrisy, that is pretending to be more righteous than one actually is.

XXVIII. I suspect that the parable originally addressed Jesus's disciples and unfavorably contrasted disciples who wished to make a good impression on Jesus by pretending to be trustworthy and those who hesitated to make commitments initially but ultimately did what Jesus wanted.

XXIX. Since there will always be people who agree to do things in order to gain public approval and then do not do them and people who initially refuse to do something and then repent and do it, the parable remains relevant.

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids and the Parable of the Unfruitful Fig Tree and the Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself

I. The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids occurs only in Matthew 25:1-13.

II. A summary of the parable:

A. Introduction: The parable illustrates what the kingdom is like.

B. The narrative: Ten virgins with their lamps went out to meet the bridegroom.

1. The five wise virgins took extra oil, and the five foolish ones did not.

2. When the bridegroom delayed, all ten virgins slept.

3. In the middle of the night there was a shout that the bridegroom was about to arrive.

4. All the virgins lit their lamps.

5. But the lamps of the foolish virgins were sputtering, and the foolish virgins asked for oil from the wise.

6. The wise replied that there might not be enough oil to share and suggested that the foolish virgins go and buy more, and the foolish virgins did so.

7. But while the foolish virgins were away, the bridegroom arrived, and the wise virgins accompanied him into the wedding reception.

8. Then the door was locked.

9. The foolish virgins arrived outside and asked for admittance.

10. The bridegroom refused to let them in.

C. The moral of the story: "Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know the day nor the hour."

III. The introduction to the story may come from Matthew or an earlier editor, but it

is almost certainly correct.

- A. The central theme of Jesus's teaching was the “kingdom” of God, and, as we have seen, many of the parables were originally about it.
- B. After Jesus's resurrection the Early Church continued to hope for the coming of the “kingdom” (Acts 1:6-7).
- C. If, as I shall argue below, the parable originated in the Early Church, there is still no reason that the parable was not about the kingdom.

IV. The present moral of the story clearly comes from Matthew, but the moral also is almost certainly correct.

- A. The moral does not fit the story well, since in the story all the virgins, the wise as well as the foolish, do not stay awake.
- B. In the material before the parable in Matthew, we have a series of sections warning us of the suddenness and unpredictability of when Christ will return to judge the world and, therefore, the need for constant readiness (e.g., “Stay awake, because you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” [24:42]).
- C. Therefore, the parable did not originally have this explicit moral to stay awake.
- D. Matthew probably added the moral to continue the theme of the need to be constantly ready.
- E. Nevertheless, the moral correctly interprets the original point of the story.
 - 1. The story emphasizes both the long and unexpected delay of the groom's coming and the suddenness and unexpectedness of his arrival in the middle of the night.
 - 2. The groom in other New Testament passages is a symbol of Jesus (e.g., 2 Cor. 11:2, Rev. 19:7-9), and, as we saw above, Matthew added a reference to a marriage feast of the Son, to the Parable of the Great Supper (Matt. 22:2).
 - 3. The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids must have always been an exhortation not to give up hope in the second coming of Christ despite a long and unexpected delay and instead to be ready for his triumphant return at any moment.
 - 4. The original point of the story was that those who faithfully follow Jesus and wait will gain salvation; those who give up and lapse will not.

V. Consequently, the parable does not go back to Jesus but comes from decades after his death.

- A. Jesus stressed that the kingdom was near (e.g., Mark 1:15).
 - 1. It was already present in a preliminary way in his own ministry (e.g., Luke 11:20, 17:20-21).
 - 2. It would later come in power, certainly during the lifetime of some of his followers (Mark 9:1). As noted above, I personally believe that Jesus hoped for a political appointment from Rome and expected that he would, perhaps gradually, rise to become the king of Judea.
- B. It seems to me incredible that long before his death Jesus predicted that after his death he would return in glory. What would anyone at the time have

thought of such a prediction?

C. It was after Jesus's crucifixion and unexpected resurrection that a persecuted church longed for and eagerly awaited his return from heaven to save his disciples. This theological perspective pervades the New Testament which is primarily a set of theological documents.

D. Initially, the church thought that this return would occur soon after Jesus's crucifixion. Paul warned that Christ's return could happen any time (1 Thes. 5:1-3) and assumed that he himself would live to see it (1 Thes. 4:15-17).

E. Then when decades passed, the Church still hoped that Jesus would soon return but had to acknowledge that a long time had elapsed and previous hopes had been premature.

F. It is in this last period which begins at least as early as Mark's Gospel (note Mark 13:7) that the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids must have originated.

G. I suspect that a Christian preacher composed the parable, used it in his sermons, and those who heard it repeated it.

H. In time, the origin of the parable was forgotten, and the oral tradition attributed the parable to Jesus.

I. Matthew incorporated the parable into his gospel and, as we have seen, added the moral and probably the introduction.

VI. I believe that despite the failure of Christ to return in glory, the parable remains valuable if we see it as a reminder for Christians to be prepared for whatever may happen, especially, death which can occur suddenly and unexpectedly.

VII. Perhaps the most helpful message of the parable is its implicit indication of what it means to be constantly prepared. According to the parable,

A. Being constantly prepared does *not* mean never resting. The wise bridesmaids do sleep.

B. Being prepared *does* mean having the (spiritual) resources at hand so that we can turn to them as soon as the necessity arises. The wise bridesmaids had the reserve oil when it was needed.

VIII. The Parable of the Unfruitful Fig Tree appears only in Luke 13:6-9.

IX. A summary of the parable:

A. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard.

B. For three years he looked for fruit on it and found none.

C. He told the gardener to cut the tree down.

D. The gardener asked the owner to wait another year until the gardener fertilized.

E. Then if the tree did not bear fruit, the owner could cut it down.

X. In the verse before the parable Jesus declares that unless people repent they will perish (Luke 13:5).

XI. Consequently, the point of the parable in Luke's Gospel is that judgment will surely come but has been delayed so that people have time to repent and that it is urgent to repent soon.

- XII. This warning fits well into the period in which Luke was writing.
- A. The earlier expectation that Jesus would return within the lifetime of his disciples had not materialized.
 - B. In response to the disappointment, some Christians began to wonder if Christ would ever return, and if not, what was the point of suffering for the gospel (2 Peter 3:4).
 - C. The church continued to insist that Jesus would return and justified the delay as due to God graciously extending the time for people to repent.
 - D. We find this justification in 2 Peter 3:9-10: “The Lord . . . is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but for all to reach repentance, but the Day of the Lord will come . . . “
 - E. I believe that the Gospel of Luke and 2 Peter are from approximately the same time.
 - 1. 2 Peter comes from the early second century. 2 Peter regards Paul's collected letters as part of scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16), and the canonization of Paul's letters could not have occurred much earlier.
 - 2. The date of Luke's Gospel is debated, but I agree with those who place it in the early second century, since in his preface Luke refers to “many” who have already written gospels (Luke 1:1).
- XIII. Consequently, the Parable of the Unfruitful Fig Tree does not come from Jesus but from much later.
- XIV. Nevertheless, the Parable of the Unfruitful Fig Tree remains relevant, because it is always a mistake to delay repentance.
- XV. The Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself occurs only in Mark 4:26-29.
- XVI. The absence of the parable in both Matthew and Luke is striking, since they used Mark as a source and suggests that they viewed the parable as problematic.
- XVII. Consequently, we will consider the parable in detail. Here is the entire text:
- The kingdom of God is as though a person casts seed on the ground. And he sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows. He himself does not know how. By itself the ground bears fruit, first the blade, next the ear, next the full grain in the ear. Whenever the fruit permits, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.
- XVIII. The parable emphasizes several things:
- A. The slowness of the seed's growth.
 - 1. The man sleeps and rises night and day.
 - 2. The growth takes place in stages, first the blade, next the ear, next the grain.
 - B. The mysteriousness of the growth.
 - 1. The man does not know how the seed grows.
 - 2. The earth produces the growth.
 - C. The suddenness of the harvest “immediately” when the grain is ripe.

XIX. Since the parable by its own testimony is about the “kingdom of God,” the primary message is that the kingdom will come slowly and in stages and humans will not know how the kingdom can grow, but that it surely will.

XX. The “harvest” here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, is the last judgment (Matt. 13:39-43, Rev. 14:14-20).

XXI. In its *present form* the parable fits perfectly the period when years had passed since Jesus's crucifixion and the church had grown, but despite high expectations Jesus had not returned but his sudden return was still awaited.

XXII. Nevertheless, I think that the bulk of the parable probably does go back to Jesus, and only “immediately” was added later.

A. Jesus told a number of parables about growing seeds. For an analysis of the Parable of the Sower, the Parable of the Mustard Seed, and the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, see above.

B. A theme in at least the Sower and the Parable of the Mustard Seed is the contrast between small beginnings and great ends.

C. As we have seen, such parables were a response to doubts that Jesus's pathetically small and weak movement could ever amount to much.

D. The seed growing by itself also illustrated Jesus's claim that the small beginnings would lead to great conclusions.

E. “Immediately” is one of Mark's favorite words, and he could easily have added it to stress his hope that Jesus would return soon.

F. Jesus certainly believed that there would be a final resurrection and judgment and warned people to live in light of this future (e.g., Matt. 11:20-24, 12:41-42).

G. But in this parable at least he insists that the kingdom will not come “immediately,” but slowly and in stages.

XXIII. If this analysis is correct, the Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself originally illustrated Jesus's hope that he would in time get a Roman political appointment which, probably after a prolonged rise in power, would end with him becoming the king of Judea and beginning his social program of raising up the poor and supporting egalitarianism. Of course, Jesus's benevolent reign over Judea would prepare people for the final judgment.

XXIV. Perhaps here we have a plausible explanation for why Matthew and Luke both omitted this parable even though they used Mark as a source. Matthew and Luke were not comfortable with the historical fact that Jesus had hoped to become an earthly ruler. Note that in the Acts Luke defers Jesus restoring the kingdom to Israel to an indefinite future after the gospel has been preached to the ends of the Earth (Acts 1:6-8).

XXV. Of course, Jesus did not succeed in getting a Roman political appointment, a failure that Matthew and Luke were unable to face.

XXVI. But from a later historical perspective, Jesus's hope that the movement he started would change the world proved to be correct.

XXVII. It remains a challenge to his present followers to continue to lift up the poor and strive to make the world more egalitarian.

The Parable of the Petulant Children and the Parable of the Wicked Tenants

I. The Parable of the Petulant Children occurs with minor variations in wording in Matthew 11:16-19 and Luke 7:31-35.

II. A summary of the parable:

A. Introduction: “To what shall I [Jesus] this generation?”

B. Narrative:

1. Children in the marketplace calling to one another saying,
2. “We piped to you and you did not dance.”
3. “We sang dirges, and you would not mourn.”

C. Application:

1. John the Baptist was an ascetic, and people said he had a demon.
2. Jesus partied, and people said he was a glutton and a drunk and a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

D. “Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds” (Matt.). Or, “Wisdom is justified by all her children” (Luke).

III. This parable fits the ministry of Jesus perfectly and goes back to him.

A. John the Baptist whose ministry was in the wilderness must have been an ascetic.

B. Jesus certainly partied with the disreputable (e.g., Mark 2:13-17).

C. The Early Church which revered John and, especially, Jesus would not have made up serious charges against them.

IV. The parable with its application clearly commends and contrasts John and Jesus.

A. The conclusion that the ministries of both people are in accord with wisdom clearly praises the John and Jesus. Note: I strongly suspect that here “wisdom” is not

1. Merely intelligent discernment,
2. But Lady Wisdom, the divine mind, through whom God made the universe.

B. Yet the lifestyle of the two individuals are starkly contrasted: asceticism versus celebration.

V. The resolution of the paradoxical comparison must surely be that the contrasting ministries of the two people reflect two different stages in the history of salvation.

A. John's asceticism was appropriate as a preparation for the coming of the messianic age.

B. Jesus's celebratory lifestyle was appropriate for the arrival of God's kingdom.

VI. Of course, (many of) “this generation” did not understand and rejected both John and Jesus.

VII. Despite the parable's clear condemnation of the obtuseness of “this generation,” there is a playfulness about the parable which bespeaks a degree of tolerance and optimism.

- A. The parable does not say that those who reject both John the Baptist and Jesus are evil or vicious.
 - B. Instead, the parable pictures them as merely childish and foolish.
 - C. The message of the parable and its application seems to be that those who reject John and Jesus need to grow up and perhaps they will do so.
- VIII. In my reconstruction of the life of Jesus this parable reflects the period before Jesus's effort to gain popular support and get a political appointment from Rome failed.
- IX. An important timeless meaning of the Parable of the Petulant Children is the danger of avoiding spiritual reality by using contrary excuses for not facing it.
- A. The children refuse to join with their playmates both because the latter will neither dance nor mourn.
 - B. So too people will refuse to listen to God
 - 1. Both because it is too easy, and they would rather challenge themselves not to rely on the "crutch" of religion,
 - 2. And listening to God is too difficult, because they do not have time for prayer and worship.
 - C. Such inconsistent rationalizations are easy and stupid and can be catastrophic.
- X. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants occurs in four sources with minor variations (Matthew 21:33-41, Mark 12:1-9, Luke 20:9-16, Thomas 65).
- XI. A summary of the narrative.
- A. A man planted a vineyard.
 - B. He leased it out to tenants.
 - C. At harvest season he sent a series of slaves to collect his share of the crop.
 - D. The tenants mistreated the slaves.
 - E. The owner of the vineyard sent his son with the hope that the tenants would respect him.
 - F. The tenants recognized that the son would be the heir of the vineyard.
 - G. They killed the son in the hope of gaining possession.
- XII. An appendix found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke but not Thomas.
- A. Jesus asks what the owner of the vineyard will do to the tenants.
 - B. Jesus (Mark 12:9, Luke 20:16) or his audience (Matthew 21:41) replies that the owner will destroy the tenants and lease the vineyard to others.
- XIII. The parable is an allegory.
- A. The vineyard is Israel. In the Jewish Scriptures a vineyard or a vine is a symbol for Israel (Isa. 5:7, Psalm 80).
 - B. The owner of the vineyard is God.
 - C. The slaves are the Hebrew prophets and probably John the Baptist who demanded righteousness, and fruit in the teaching of John the Baptist and Jesus symbolizes righteousness (Matt.3:8, 7:15-23). Some of the Hebrew prophets, especially Jeremiah, suffered persecution, and John the Baptist was imprisoned and killed.
 - D. The Son is Jesus, the messianic king. The kings of Israel and Judah had

the title of Son of God (Psalm 2:6-7)

XIV. The meaning of the parable is that after Israel sinfully rejected the former messengers of God, it will now culminate its sin by killing Jesus.

XV. Jesus getting killed does not occur in any other parable and was not a continuing theme in his teaching.

A. Instead, Jesus's prediction of his own violent death was a late development after Jesus's hopes for a political appointment failed.

B. Subsequently, the evangelists, looking back at Jesus through the lens of the crucifixion and resurrection, had Jesus earlier keep announcing that he would be killed.

C. These earlier predictions of martyrdom are mostly in private teaching to the disciples (Mark 8:27-33, 9:2-13, 10:32-34), and this secrecy may be a literary acknowledgment by the evangelists that the predictions are theological rather than historical. The violent death of Jesus was always part of *God's* plan.

D. Of course, any attempt to become king was highly risky, and historically Jesus may have warned his disciples well in advance of the *possibility* of him being killed, and the passion predictions in the gospels may reflect this warning.

XVI. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants certainly goes back to Jesus, since there is no mention of a resurrection, as there surely would be if the parable originated in the Early Church (John Meier).

XVII. The appendix probably does not come from Jesus but from later interpretation.

A. The appendix is not part of the parable.

B. The question of what the owner (God) will do to the tenants is already implicit in the parable itself.

C. The synoptics do not agree on whether the prediction that the owner (God) will destroy the tenants (Israel) comes from Jesus (Mark 12:9, Luke 20:16) or his audience (Matt. 21:41).

D. The destruction of the tenants (Israel) is surely the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE and was added to the parable later. Note that Matthew made a similar addition to the Parable of the Great Supper (see above).

E. The appendix does not appear in the Gospel of Thomas, perhaps because that source restricted its material to the sayings of Jesus, and at least in Matthew the prediction of the destruction of the tenants comes from the audience. However, it is at least possible that Thomas records a tradition that still remembered that the original parable did not have an appendix.

XVIII. What is most remarkable about the original parable is what is *not* there.

A. There is no mention of any punishment for the tenants who persecuted the slaves and killed the Son (Jesus).

B. No mention of the vindication of the Son (Jesus).

C. No mention that the death of the Son will bring atonement or even is somehow in accordance with God's will.

XIX. I believe that Jesus spoke the parable near the end of his ministry after his effort to become an earthly King of the Jews failed.

A. The synoptics place the parable after Jesus's triumphant approach to

Jerusalem and his protest against the Temple.

B. During the approach, Jesus's supporters publicly welcomed him as the new davidic king ("Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David" [Mark 11:10, cf. John 12:13]).

C. The protest in the Temple was in part an appeal to the populace to support Jesus as a champion of the poor. Jesus's condemnation of the Temple as a cave of "bandits" (Mark 11:1) pointed out that the Temple exploited the poor who purchased sacrificial offerings, made donations, and paid a temple tax even though the high priest was wealthy. Note that Jesus's condemnation echoed Jeremiah's centuries earlier who in response to the oppression of the widow and orphan denounced the temple as a "den of robbers" (Jer. 7:11).

D. The protest in the temple was also a message to the Roman government that Jesus would not resist Roman rule.

1. By condemning the Temple as a cave of "bandits," Jesus also condemned violent resistance to Roman rule. "Bandit" was a negative word for a rebel against Rome.

2. By proclaiming that the Temple was supposed to be a "House of Prayer for all nations" (Mark 11:17, Isa. 56:7), Jesus was welcoming Roman participation in temple worship.

E. However, Jesus failed to gain support either from the poor or from the Romans for his royal hopes and came to the conclusion that he would be killed.

F. It must have been at that point that Jesus spoke the Parable of the Wicked Tenants.

XX. To me, the parable is an astonishing acceptance of God's will despite disappointment and uncertainty about the purpose of Jesus's life.

A. The parable still symbolically affirms that Jesus is God's "Son," that is the Messianic King of Israel (see Psalm 2).

B. Yet, the parable acknowledges that Jesus himself will be killed.

C. The parable does not claim that somehow his death will accomplish anything.

D. The parable does not even call down vengeance on the tenants (the enemies of Jesus) who will kill him.

E. Everything is left up to God.

XXI. Apparently, Jesus told the parable publicly.

A. The gospels record that he did so (e.g., Mark 12:1).

B. And an allegorical parable seems more appropriate to a public statement than to private instruction.

XXII. Consequently, the parable left its original hearers with the question of how God would respond to the murder of someone who claimed to be the Messiah.

XXIII. I believe that in private Jesus told his disciples both

A. Because Israel had rejected him, the nation would come to catastrophe and yet ultimately God's plan for salvation through Jesus would somehow be fulfilled.

1. This scenario is completely consistent with the message of the classical

prophets.

2. Jesus himself makes these predictions privately in Mark 13.

B. Jesus own death would help atone for Israel's sin.

1. This hope is consistent with the suffering servant passages in Isaiah (especially, 52:13-53:12) and the words of the martyrs in 2 Maccabees 7 (especially verses 37-38).

2. And consistent with Jesus's declaration at the Last Supper that the Eucharist which he was inaugurating was a new covenant in his blood (e.g., Mark 14:24, Luke 22:20). Note that this declaration must go back to Jesus because only he would have inaugurated a Jewish rite that was so offensive.

a. Eating Jesus's body sounded like ritual cannibalism.

b. Drinking Jesus's blood was even more offensive, since the Hebrew Bible repeatedly forbids consuming blood (already, Gen. 9:4).

XXIV. At least historically what happened after the enemies of Jesus made the Parable of the Wicked Tenants come true by having the Romans crucify him was

A. Jesus's resurrection.

B. His disciples preaching first to Jews and then to Gentiles.

C. The destruction of Jerusalem.

D. The estrangement between the Church and Jesus's own ethnic people, the Jews.

XXV. In most of subsequent Church history these events would provide much of the context for the traditional understanding of the parables, an understanding that in some respects was contrary to Jesus's own perspective.

A. Already in the appendix to the Parable of the Wicked Tenants we find the theology that God will now give the vineyard to others (that is, God will give the privileges of Israel to the church).

B. It is historically most unlikely that Jesus himself would have accepted this supersessionist theology, since he offered his own death as an atonement for Israel's sin.

Two Contrasting Parables about Life After Death: Lazarus and the Rich Man and The Separation of the Sheep and the Goats.

I. Most of the gospel parables concern what happens in this world.

II. However, there are two which primarily focus on life after death, namely the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, and the Parable of the Separation of the Sheep and the Goats.

III. The Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man appears only in Luke 16:19-31.

IV. A summary of the parable:

A. A rich man (traditionally known as "Dives" [Latin: "rich"]) lived happily in great luxury.

- B. A poor man, Lazarus, was at his gate covered with sores and starving.
- C. Both men died.
- D. Lazarus went to Paradise where he was with Abraham.
- E. The rich man went to Hades where he suffered in flames.
- F. He looked up and saw Lazarus and Abraham and asked for Abraham to send Lazarus to alleviate his misery.
- G. Abraham replied that the rich man's suffering was appropriate, since Lazarus in his previous life suffered deprivation, whereas the rich man had luxuries. And besides it was impossible for someone to travel between Paradise and Hades.
- H. The rich man asked for Lazarus to warn his living brothers so that they would not end up tormented in Hades.
- I. Abraham pointed out that the brothers could avoid this fate by paying attention to Moses and the prophets.
- J. The rich man replied that they would only repent if someone went to them from the dead.
- K. Abraham said that if they would not listen to Moses and the prophets, they would not be persuaded even if someone rose from the dead.
- V. It is unlikely that the parable goes back to Jesus.
 - A. The authentic parables concern the kingdom of God with its emphasis on the coming of a new social order in which Jesus would be a servant king and there would be justice on earth, especially for those who were presently suffering.
 - B. There is nothing about a new social order in the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man.
 - C. Instead, the message is timeless, and there is no hint of the earthly Jesus.
 - D. There is an allusion in the parable to Jesus's resurrection, and at least the allusion must have come from the Early Church. In the dialogue between Abraham and the rich man, there is an odd change.
 - 1. The rich man says that his brothers would repent if someone *goes* to them from the dead.
 - 2. But Abraham replies that if the brothers do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone *rose* from the dead.
 - 3. That alteration alludes to the resurrection of Jesus.
 - 4. Therefore, it comes from a later period when from the Christian point of view, the enemies of the church would not be persuaded by the scriptures (as understood by Christians!) nor by Jesus rising from the dead.
 - E. If Jesus had told the parable, it is more likely that he would have used the Hebrew word for hell, "Gehenna," rather than the Greek word, "Hades."
 - F. By contrast, important portions of the parable fit well with special perspectives in Luke's writings.
 - 1. Luke-Acts teaches that at death the spirit immediately goes to the next

life (Luke 23:42-43, 46; Acts 7:59).

2. Luke also emphasizes that in the next life the rich will suffer and the poor will rejoice. And Luke does not claim that the poor are more righteous than the rich, but only that the rich have their reward in this world, whereas the poor do not (Luke 6:20-26).

3. Luke has a wider knowledge than Jesus did of Jewish and Gentile culture. Note Luke's presentation of Paul's interaction with the philosophers of Athens (Acts 17).

4. In both Jewish and Gentile culture there were various accounts of the blessings of the righteous and the sufferings of the wicked after death.

VI. I suspect that Luke

A. Either produced the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus by modifying an older story wrongly attributed to Jesus.

B. Or composed the parable himself but in doing so drew on material about the afterlife from older sources.

C. Luke could not have produced the story from scratch, because if he had, he surely would have Lazarus going to be with Jesus, not Abraham.

VII. The parable makes two points:

A. Those who have resources must help those who do not, because after death people will have to give an account of what they did with their surplus. Or to use a saying attributed to Jesus that only appears in Luke, "Those to whom much has been given, of them much will be expected" (Luke 12:48).

B. To have a reward after death, we must listen to the scriptures.

VIII. The Parable of the Separation of the Sheep and the Goats appears only in Matthew 25:31-46.

IX. A summary of the parable:

A. The Son of Humanity (that is, Christ) will return in glory, and all the nations will be gathered before him.

B. Christ will separate them as a shepherd separates sheep from goats and will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

C. He will tell the sheep that they will inherit the blessings which God has prepared for them, because, when he was in need, they provided for him.

D. They will ask when was it that they provided for him.

E. Christ will reply that what they did to the least of his brothers (and sisters) they did to him.

F. Christ will then tell the goats to go away to hell, because when he was in need they did not provide for him.

G. They will ask when was it that they did not provide for him, and he will answer that what they did not do to the least of his brothers (and sisters) they did not do to him.

H. The wicked will go to eternal punishment and the righteous, to eternal life.

X. It is unlikely that this story goes back to Jesus.

A. It is true that Jesus believed that there would be a final judgment when

those who followed his teaching would gain eternal life and those who did not would suffer.

1. The men of Nineveh would rise at the last judgment and condemn Jesus's generation because they repented at the preaching of Jonah, whereas Jesus's generation did not repent despite something greater being present (Matt. 12:41).
2. This saying must go back to Jesus, since later tradition would surely have written that *someone* greater (that is, Jesus) was present. And only Jesus with his penchant for using evil people as role models for good behavior (see the discussion above of the Parables of the Dishonest Manager and Unjust Judge) would have the notorious men of Nineveh condemn his contemporaries.

B. Nevertheless, I do not think that Jesus either believed that the Son of Humanity (usually translated as the Son of Man) would judge the world or that Jesus himself would judge the Gentiles.

1. The Son of Humanity is a highly debated topic in New Testament studies.
2. But it is clear that normally the phrase meant “a [mere] human being.”
3. When Jesus used the phrase to apply to himself, he meant that he was the first example of the new type of human being that the kingdom was calling into existence. Note such sayings as Mark 2:10, 2:27-28; Matt. 11:11.
4. Jesus hoped that he could become the king of the Jews and that he and his assistants would “judge” (that is bring justice) to Israel (Matt. 19:28).
5. But I think that it is most unlikely that Jesus thought that at the last judgment he would personally judge the Gentiles.
6. Instead, it was after the resurrection that the church recognized that Jesus was divine and the church under the influence of Daniel 7 concluded that Jesus would as the Son of Humanity judge the world.

C. In Matthew the Parable of the Separation of the Sheep and Goats is the literary climax of a long section on the triumphant return of Christ to judge the world (beginning at least by 24:30).

D. Therefore, it is likely that Matthew produced the parable, which, to be sure, was based on more general teaching by Jesus.

XI. The point of the parable is, of course, that the risen Christ will judge people on whether they have ministered to the needy, because Christ cares about them as much as he cares about himself.

XII. There have been disagreements among scholars as to whether the needy in the parable could be a member of any group or only a member of some smaller, more deserving one.

A. In the parable Jesus declares that whatever was done to the least of his *brothers* was done to Jesus himself.

B. But who are Jesus's brothers? Are they all human beings? Or only

Christians? Or even only some group of Christians (Christian missionaries?)? Scholars have opted for each of these possibilities.

C. Of course, it is clear that here “brothers” includes women, since when the context allows, the Greek word for brothers is gender inclusive, and the Early Church had many female members.

XIII. From a literary perspective, the most important passage in determining Matthew's overall message is the Great Commission, Matthew 28:16-20.

A. This is the concluding passage of the gospel, and normally conclusions summarize the most important points of a document.

B. The passage is highly dramatic with Jesus making a final resurrection appearance, declaring that he has all authority in heaven and earth, and commanding the apostles to convert all the nations.

XIV. The command to convert all the nations presupposes that the risen Christ cares deeply about all people.

XV. Therefore, it seems to me that when Jesus declares that what we have done to the least of his brothers we have done to him, the least could be any person in need.

XVI. However, it is ethically significant that Jesus will judge us all on how we have treated the *least*, since how we treat the weakest person is the true measure of our goodness.

A. It is in natural to be kind to the rich and powerful when they are in need, because they can help us if we help them and hurt us if we do not. If our boss is in the hospital, it is natural to visit.

B. But it is a sign of true goodness if we visit someone who has no power and no one to turn to for assistance. Visiting that person is a self-sacrifice on our part, and as Jesus remarks in Luke's Gospel, because that person cannot repay us, Christ at the resurrection will (Luke 14:13-14).

XVII. It is also significant that in the parable neither the righteous nor the wicked were aware that they were serving Christ, because true goodness does not seek a reward but focuses on the needs of others.

A. In the parable both the righteous and the wicked are initially puzzled when Jesus declares that they did or did not help him when he was in need, and both groups ask for an explanation.

B. What they did or did not do to the least was due to whether or not they were genuinely concerned about the person in need.

C. And surely, the highest form of goodness is to be centered in the needs of others rather than to be self-seeking.

XVIII. There are many similarities between the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man and the Parable of the Separation of the Sheep and the Goats.

A. Both parables insist that there will be a final judgment.

B. Both emphasize that serious sins of *omission* will lead to damnation.

1. The parables do not say that Dives or the goats did anything wrong.

2. What was wrong was that they had the resources to help the needy and failed to do so.

C. Both parables suggest that ignorance of the future consequences of ignoring

the needy now will not save us when the judgment comes.

1. Abraham has to explain to the rich man that the rich man got his good things during his life on earth and is not entitled to anything more.
2. The goats ask when was it that they neglected Jesus, not knowing that what they did not do for the needy, they did not do for Jesus.

D. Both parables stress that damnation includes separation from the righteous, and, by implication, separation from God.

1. There is a chasm between the rich man and Abraham that cannot be crossed.
2. Jesus first separates the goats from the sheep and then tells the goats go away from him to the fire prepared for the Devil and his angels.

XIX. However, there is a major difference between the parables on the timing of the judgment.

A. Clearly the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man assumes that we will face judgment immediately after death. While the rich man is suffering in Hades, his brothers are still on earth, and he wants Lazarus to warn them not to make the mistake which he did.

B. By contrast, the Parable of the Separation of the Sheep and the Goats pictures all the nations gathered before Jesus after he has returned in glory (Matt. 25:31-32). The implicit assumption is that everyone including the men of Nineveh and Jesus's own generation will rise from the dead together at some future date and judgment will occur then (Matt. 12:41).

XX. Since we are dealing with *parables* not theological essays, we could assume that the discrepancy in timing was not important.

A. Luke also affirms that there will be a final resurrection from the dead followed by judgment. Indeed, he too tells us that the men of Nineveh will rise with the generation of Jesus and condemn it at the last judgment (Luke 11:32).

B. So Luke apparently did not think that it mattered when the judgment would occur. And perhaps in the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man Luke was only insisting that there would be a judgment, not that it would necessarily occur immediately after an individual's death.

C. Since Jesus also taught in images rather than in dogmatic statements, his pictures of the dead rising may only have been an affirmation that there would be a judgment, not a precise picture of how or when it would occur.

D. Perhaps the same can be said about various passages about life after death in the Old Testament (e.g., Daniel 12:1-3).

XXI. Nevertheless, at least subsequent orthodox theology combined both positions on when the judgment would occur.

A. When individuals died, their souls left their bodies, and the righteous went to heaven and were with Jesus and the wicked suffered elsewhere.

B. Later, Jesus would return in triumph to Earth and raise the physical remains of the dead and reunite the souls with their bodies. The righteous would reign with Jesus on a renewed Earth, and the wicked would suffer in hell somewhere underground.

C. The definitive literary presentation of this theological synthesis is Dante's Divine Comedy.

XXII. There were serious problems with this synthesis.

A. Since human bodies decomposed and in some cases even got recycled into other human bodies, the resurrection of the body was hard to imagine and sometimes bordered on being logically impossible.

B. The departure of the soul from the body at death presupposed that human beings during earthly life were composed of a corruptible body and an immortal soul.

C. But his presupposition was problematic.

1. It was never clear how a corruptible body and an immortal soul could work together.

2. There was little evidence that an immortal soul even existed, especially since a sick body impacted spiritual functions.

3. The dualism of body and soul denigrated the body and the material world and, especially, sex. Note that sex is the physical act that most influences our "spirits."

D. The combination of the soul going to judgment at death and temporarily being in heaven or suffering elsewhere and then being reunited with an earthly body was complicated and implied that the dead in heaven lacked final fulfillment.

XXIII. In modern times several things have occurred that raise further questions of whether resurrection of the body on the Day of Judgment is credible.

A. The Day of Judgment which the Early Church felt was near has delayed for two thousand years.

B. Scientists have discovered that the universe is nearly fourteen billion years old with an unimaginable number of planets, some of which could contain intelligent life.

C. Life on earth has evolved for eons.

D. Therefore, to believe in a final resurrection of the body, one must believe that God will intervene on one planet and

1. End billions of years of geological and biological evolution

2. Somehow restore life to bodies which have decayed and been recycled, even recycled into other human beings!

E. In response to such problems mainline Christian denominations have increasingly stressed judgment at the moment of death and downplayed waiting for Christ's triumphant return to earth to raise the dead.

F. Meanwhile, marginal Christian groups have kept predicting the imminent return of Christ, and these predictions have always been at least premature and have weakened Christian faith in people who believed them and made Christianity (or, at least some forms of it) look ridiculous.

G. For what it is worth, I think that it is now time for the Church to admit that bodily resurrection on some future day is no longer plausible (if it ever was).

XXIV. By contrast, several things have happened which make the resurrection of the

self at the moment of death and some sort of immediate judgment highly likely even without any religious evidence.

A. We now know that the self is a complex electronic pattern produced by the firing of nerve endings and that in the present life the body sustains the pattern.

B. Thanks to computer technology, we know that a complex electronic pattern containing human thoughts and emotions can be sent wirelessly into another place. One example of the process is e-mail.

C. Thanks to advances in medicine, it is now often possible to revive people who were clinically dead, and we have numerous accounts of near-death, out-of-body experiences. People report

1. When their bodily functions ceased, they left their body.

2. They soon went through a “tunnel.”

3. On the other side they met their departed friends and relatives.

4. The deceased were interviewed by a “Being of Light” who showed them all that they had ever done and how their good deeds benefited others and their evil deeds harmed others. The deceased were proud of their good deeds and ashamed of their evil ones.

5. Then thanks to the advances of modern medicine, the deceased were able to return to their bodies and earthly life.

6. The deceased are almost always certain that their out-of-body experiences were accurate and not hallucinations.

7. And at least in some cases people learned things when clinically dead that subsequently have turned out to be verifiable.

D. On the basis of such information it seems very likely that at death the body, so to speak, punches the “send button,” the “spirit” (i.e., the electronic pattern) leaves the body and goes to another realm and faces judgment by God.

E. Of course, religious experience confirms this conclusion and is what the church always taught. We experience that God gives to us new energy (during prayer, for example), and the church has always taught that God who empowers us here raises us to new life when we die.

XXV. This new understanding of life after death at least partially vindicates the older compromise of the departure of the soul at death and a subsequent bodily resurrection, since an electronic pattern has similarities to both a body (an energy field is something physical) and a soul (an energy field is not matter).

XXVI. This new understanding of life after death is compatible with the bodily resurrection of Jesus if the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a special sign of his divinity and that there is life after death, rather than an exact model for our own future resurrection. The theology that the bodily resurrection of Jesus was a special “sign” already appears in John’s Gospel (20:30).

Some Final Reflections

I. The significance of Jesus imparting religion in parables rather than in abstract

ideas.

- A. There are basically two ways of talking about theology and ethics.
 - 1. One can present abstract ideas.
 - 2. One can tell stories.
 - B. There are advantages to using abstract ideas.
 - 1. Abstract ideas can be
 - a. Precise, whereas the messages of stories are more ambiguous.
 - b. Stated briefly, whereas stories are longer.
 - 2. Ideas are more appealing to the intellect.
 - C. Because of these advantages, higher education at least in many disciplines, including religion, relies primarily on ideas, not stories.
 - D. There are also advantages to stories.
 - 1. Stories are more entertaining and memorable than ideas.
 - 2. Stories appeal more to our emotions than ideas do. A statistic about the unequal distribution of wealth is not as moving as a story of a poor man starving by a rich man's gate.
 - 3. Consequently, stories are more likely to motivate action.
 - E. Jesus's reliance on parables suggests that he was primarily concerned with getting people to act differently rather than with getting them to understand more fully. He was more an activist than a teacher. He wanted to become a king rather than be recognized as a wise man. Here it is noteworthy that in the Hebrew Bible parables are part of the prophetic confrontation of injustice rather than part of the wisdom tradition (Judges 9:7-21, 2 Samuel 12:1-10, Isaiah 5:1-7 [John Meier]).
- II. As the material covered above demonstrates, the parables by Jesus or, at least, attributed to him are very diverse, both in theme and in literary style.
- III. This diversity makes generalizations hazardous, but may itself be significant.
- A. The diversity suggests that Jesus tried to reach a variety of people and address a variety of situations and used different types of parables to have a maximum impact.
 - B. After Jesus's death and resurrection the church continued the tradition of making the parables relevant both by
 - 1. Reshaping the parables Jesus told, often by adding new morals to them.
 - 2. Writing additional parables which in time got attributed to Jesus.
- IV. The situation of the historical Jesus and the situation of the Early Church were fundamentally different.
- A. In my reconstruction Jesus attempted to get a political appointment in order to produce a new social reality, a kingdom in which he would be a servant ruler and in which the poor would be raised up and there would be more equality.
 - B. By contrast, the Early Church had no possibility of transforming society through political action and instead
 - 1. Hoped for the dramatic return of Jesus who would alter fundamental reality.

2. In the meantime tried to produce a holy community.
- V. Because of these different situations the parables changed.
 - A. The parables that Jesus told were primarily about the kingdom of God.
 1. As we have seen, many of Jesus's parables emphasized inclusiveness. All were welcome to join the kingdom, regardless of past behavior, present social status, or even virtue. People were welcome in the kingdom even if they joined for totally selfish reasons.
 2. As we have also seen, many of the parables addressed concrete social issues, such as financial debt and egalitarian social status.
 - a. The Parable of the Merciless Creditor, the Parable of the Two Debtors, the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, the Parable of the Dishonest Steward all deal with giving the needy a financial break.
 - b. The Parables of the Loving Father and His Two Sons, the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, the Parable of Pharisee and the Tax Collector and the Parable of the Lost Sheep all stress that in some strange but fundamental way everyone is equal in the eyes of God and should be equal among the disciples of Jesus.
 3. A lot of the parables have elements that are strange and/or offensive, and these disconcerting elements are a frequent reminder that the kingdom that Jesus was proclaiming was very different from conventional kingdoms and required a different way of thinking and acting.
 - B. The parables that the Early Church told, whether by modifying Jesus's own parables, especially by providing morals, or by writing new parables, were primarily about two themes.
 1. One theme in the church's parables was Jesus's triumphant return to judge the world. The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids and the Parable of the Separation of the Sheep and the Goats and the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds as edited by Matthew are about what will happen when Jesus returns.
 2. Another theme in the church's parables is the necessity of holy living, including ethical uprightness.
 - a. The Parable of the Unjust Judge which was originally about enlightened selfishness, became through Luke's editing an invitation to disciplined prayer.
 - b. The Parable of the Great Supper which was originally an invitation for all regardless of righteousness to enter the kingdom, became through Matthew's editing a warning that not everyone in the church would be saved. The man who entered the wedding feast without putting on a wedding garment was cast into the outer darkness.
- VI. Today we live in another situation, or rather, different people live in different situations.
- VII. Consequently, we must appropriate the messages of the parables in various

ways.

- A. Sometimes the original message of the parables that Jesus told will be relevant.
- B. Sometimes the parables as altered or invented by the Early Church will be more helpful.
- C. Sometimes we will focus on secondary or even permissible messages in the parables, because these implied messages are more useful to us now. Our motives in concentrating on implied messages may be either good or bad.
 - 1. We may focus on implied messages to deal helpfully with situations which are sufficiently new that the original primary messages of a parable could not address them directly.
 - 2. Or we may focus on implied messages because the original message of the parables clearly conflicts with our own religious, political, or social selfish interests. Such use of implied messages
 - a. Allows us to appear to affirm the parable and thereby win the support of those for whom the parable is authoritative.
 - b. Obscure the primary message of the parable and thereby undermine the parable's impact.
 - 3. In practice, people at least claim that they are using implied messages to reveal legitimate applications of a parable, but in reality it is impossible not to be swayed by one's own religious, political, and social commitments.

VIII. In these lectures I have attempted to give both a reconstruction of the original parables that Jesus told and an analysis of the parables that the Church told and the implications of each.

IX. In addition, I have pointed out some implied messages that have been helpful in my own life and context.

X. Much of what I have proposed is controversial, especially my claim that Jesus sought a political appointment from the Roman government and that the parables which he told are compatible with my claim.

XI. Although I have tried to be objective, I have looked at the parables through my personal lens as a politically progressive, orthodox Christian.

XII. The reader of these notes will have to decide whether or not my conclusions are convincing.

XIII. Regardless of that decision, I have at least wrestled with the parables in the hope that through them God will lead me both into timeless truth and to specific truths that are applicable to my life now.

XIV. As Jesus says at the conclusion of Luke's presentation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, "You go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37).