

Jesus the poet

This is the first in a series of articles which will look at the various teaching methods used by Jesus and why it's important to understand these methods in order to have a clear understanding of His message. This series of articles will include the following:

1. Jesus the poet
2. Jesus' use of humour
3. Jesus' use of figures of speech
4. Interpreting the parables
5. Teaching through miracles
6. Direct encounters with individuals

Jesus was undoubtedly an interesting speaker. Large crowds followed him, sometimes travelling long distances and going without food so they would not miss a word. His audience were impressed by the way in which He taught, as well as by His message and His unique personality. The reason He drew large crowds was a combination of *what* He taught, *who* He was, and *how* He taught. These articles will look at how these three things were woven together to produce the most powerful message ever taught.

JESUS THE POET Hebrew poetry is quite different to English poetry. For example, English poetry tends to rely on *similar sounds* while Hebrew poetry relies on *similar thoughts*. While English poets might be looking for words which sound the same, Hebrew poets would be looking for different words which express similar ideas. Consequently, English poetry makes extensive use of rhyming and wordplays, while Hebrew poetry uses sometimes complex techniques for setting ideas against each other. We call this Hebrew poetic device *parallelism* because ideas are set against each other in parallel lines. There are several different ways of using parallelism and the following examples range from simple and fairly obvious ones through to more complex forms. All the examples are taken from Jesus' own teachings although the Old Testament contains large amounts of Hebrew poetry, including almost whole books (such as Psalms, Job and Isaiah). Simple parallelism where one thought is expressed and then represented in one or more ways in subsequent lines is called Synonymous Parallelism. Here is a simple example where one thought is expressed in three different ways:

1. If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.
2. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand.
3. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. (Mark 3:24-26)

Here is another example: But I tell you who hear me: 1. Love your enemies, 2. do good to those who hate you, 3. bless those who curse you, 4. pray for those who mistreat you. (Luke 6:27-28) Sometimes the parallelism can run into two or more verses, where the second and subsequent verses return to the parallelism in the first verse and build on it. Here is a good example: 1. Ask and it will be given to you; 2. seek and you will find; 3. knock and the door will be opened to you. 1. For everyone who asks receives; 2. he who seeks finds; 3. and to him who knocks the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8)

The above verses are examples of parallelism where the *same* or *synonymous* thoughts are repeated. Sometimes *contrasting* thoughts are paralleled, and this is called *Antithetical Parallelism* as in the following examples where the second line stands in *contrast* to the first. 1. For whoever wants to **save** his life will **lose** it, 2. but whoever wants to **lose** his life for me and the gospel will **save** it. (*Mark 8:35*) Notice how Jesus uses the words “save” and “lose” in both lines but simply reverses the positioning so that the two statements are contrasted. The following example is similar: 1. Whoever can be **trusted** with very little can also be **trusted** with much, 2. and whoever is **dishonest** with very little will also be **dishonest** with much. (*Luke 16:10*) Here the words “very little” and “much” stand in the same positions in both lines, but the words “trusted” and “dishonest” are set in contrast. The parallelism can become more complex as both synonymous and contrasting thoughts are woven together. An example of this is *Inverted Parallelism* and the following verses use a form of inversion where the first and last lines are related, and the middle lines are contrasted.

A1 Whoever **exalts** himself

B1 will he **humbled**

B2 and whoever **humbles** himself

A2 will be **exalted**. (*Matthew 23:12*)

Here the first and last lines (A1 and A2) use the words “exalt” and “exalted” while the middle lines (B1 and B2) contrast these by using the words “humbled” and “humbles”. Using an earlier example we can see that there is an element of *inversion* within a tight poetic structure.

A1 Whoever wants to **save** his life

B1 will **lose** it,

B2 but whoever **loses** his life for me and the gospel

A2 will **save** it. (*Mark 8:35*)

The first and last lines are similar (“save”); the second and third are a contrast (“lose”). A final example of *inverted parallelism* demonstrates how by understanding that Jesus sometimes used *poetry* we can make sense of a difficult verse.

A1 Do not give dogs what is sacred;

B1 do not throw your pearls to pigs.

B2 If you do they may trample them under their feet,

A2 and then turn and tear you to pieces. (*Matthew 7:6*)

If we read this as prose we are faced with the difficulty that Jesus appears to be saying that pigs will trample the pearls under their feet and then turn and attack the person who threw them. This would be uncharacteristic behaviour for pigs and it’s puzzling why Jesus would say this. However, seen as poetry it is clear that the first and last lines (A1 and A2) are about **dogs** and the middle lines (B1 and B2) are about **pigs**. It is the dogs who “turn and tear you to pieces”, not the pigs, and this makes perfect sense. When we are faced with a saying of Jesus which is initially difficult to understand, we should ask the question “is He using poetry?” It’s possible that we will discover an explanation simply by reading the text as verse rather than prose. For

example, in John 7:37-38 Jesus says “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” This gives the impression that Scripture teaches that streams of living water will flow from within the person who believes in Jesus. This would appear to be consistent with what Jesus said in John 4:13-14 (“... the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”) However, the difficulty lies in the words “as the Scripture has said” because John 4 was not then “Scripture” (as John still hadn’t finished writing this gospel) and there is no other Scripture which teaches that “living water” would flow from the believer. The NIV offers an alternative construction of these verses in a footnote, and suggests that this could be a use of poetry. If so, it would be an example of *synonymous parallelism*, as follows.

1 If anyone is thirsty,

2 let him come to me.

1 And let him drink,

2 who believes in me. As the Scripture has said ...

So, reading the first and third lines together, and the third and fourth lines together (i.e. as prose rather than poetry), we have “If anyone is thirsty, let him drink. And let him come to me, who believes in me.” Then the words which follow (“As the Scripture has said ...”) would be a comment or explanation about this. “Streams of living water will flow from within him” would be referring to **Jesus** as the source of living water (“... will flow from within Him” ie. from Jesus). This makes perfect sense in the context because the believer is being invited to come to Jesus to drink of Him. So, is there a Scripture which teaches this? (“As the scripture has said ...”) There are several possibilities, but it’s helpful to note that John says in verse 37 that these words were said by Jesus “on the last day of the Feast (of Tabernacles)”. As part of the celebrations on this day a priest would take water from the stream of Siloah which flowed from under the Temple mountain and pour it from golden vessels onto the altar. At this precise moment the words of Isaiah 12:3 were sung: “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation”. There are allusions here to several other Scriptures as well, including Isaiah 55:1 (“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters”), Isaiah 44:3-4, and the references in Ezekiel 47:1-12 and Zechariah 14:8 to the “living water” which flows from beneath the Temple. When Jesus said “as the Scripture has said” He may have been referring to the words being sung at that time in the Temple (Isaiah 12:3) or the large body of Scriptural material on this theme and not to any one Scriptural text. It’s important to notice that many of these Scriptures refer to water as symbolic of the *Spirit of God* (e.g. Isaiah 44:3-4 “For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring”) and John’s explanation of Jesus’ words in the next verse “By this he meant the Spirit, which those who believed in him were later to receive.” So, by reading these lines in John 7:38 as *poetry* we see that Jesus was using the occasion in the Temple when water from beneath the Temple was being poured on the altar, and the choir was signing about the “wells of salvation”, to draw their attention to Himself as the source of the Spirit for believers.

Jesus' use of humour

In the first article in this series we saw how Jesus frequently used *poetry* in His teaching. Before moving on we should consider some reasons for this.

1. It is **memorable**. Jesus' sayings were in a form which His followers would find easy to remember.
2. It is **interesting** and maintains **audience involvement**. Because of the 'progressive' nature of poetry - one line building on another - it tends to keep the attention of the listener and keeps them 'involved'

This also reveals something about Jesus' style of teaching. **He was well prepared**. We might have the impression that Jesus wandered around the countryside, getting ideas from things which he observed and making up stories on-the-spot to give them a spiritual significance. For example, He saw a farmer at work sowing a crop and spontaneously gave this task some spiritual significance by telling a parable about a sower.

However, the use of cleverly constructed sayings in poetic form indicates that Jesus put a great deal of prior thought into what He was going to teach and how He would present it. He was well-prepared. It may well have been that He prepared his sermons well in advance, with stories, parables, poetry and even humour, and that He anticipated situations which could provide a suitable context for them. When the right occasion arose He knew exactly what story to tell, what poetry to use, and what message to teach, because He had prepared well and had more than enough teaching material available for different circumstances.

These are the sorts of questions He might have asked Himself while preparing His sermons:

1. Where will I be teaching?
2. What kind of people will be there (farmers, tradesmen, scholars, rich or poor)?
3. What will be going on around me (will I be in a synagogue, a marketplace, or in a field)?
4. What has been in the local news recently?
5. What do these people really **need** to hear?

JESUS USE OF HUMOUR

Every culture has a unique style of humour. It's very difficult to translate a joke from one language into another - something is almost always 'lost' in the translation and it rarely sounds as funny once it's been translated. But even with people speaking the same language, cultural differences between communities affect our sense of humour. For example, Australians have a particular style of humour which is often not understood by Americans, even though both countries speak English. Our sense of humour, and the kinds of things we find funny, are affected by our cultural background, our history, our politics and religion, the kind of food we eat, popular personalities, the climate, and many other factors.

As a result, we may miss the humour in Jesus' words if we do not understand the characteristics of first century Jewish humour. Here are some of these characteristics which are noticeable in Jesus' teachings, with examples of each:

1. EXAGGERATION

Not all exaggeration is humorous, but exaggeration is a common feature of Jesus' humour. There are two types of exaggeration:

A. Overstatement - overstating something in order to forcefully bring home a truth. An example of this (although not necessarily humorous) would be in Matthew 5:29-30 "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away ... and if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away". If Jesus' words were taken *literally* we would expect to see a lot of one-eyed, one-handed Christians! However, we easily recognise this as an overstatement - a graphic example of how we should do *whatever it takes* to avoid sin.

Another example of overstatement (again, not humorous) is in Luke 14:26 "If any one comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters - yes, even his own life - he cannot be my disciple". Jesus is not saying we must hate the people who are closest to us, but rather, he is *overstating* a position in order to make a point forcefully. The point He is making is that compared with the **love** that we must have for Him in order to be His disciple, any other expression of love, by contrast, is "*hatred*". It's another way of forcefully saying that we must love Him immeasurably more than any other person we love, to the extent that our love for Him is enormously greater than the greatest love we have ever experienced before, or can comprehend.

B. Hyperbole - this is a *gross* exaggeration - an exaggeration to the point of unreality. These are so obviously exaggerations that we would never think of taking them literally. This type of exaggeration is common to Jewish humour of the first century, and occurs frequently in Jesus' teachings. We can imagine Jesus' listeners laughing loudly as He used this exaggeration, especially if he also "acted out" what He was describing. Here are a few examples:

"You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel". (Matthew 23:24).

I can imagine Jesus going through the motions of imitating someone who would carefully strain their water through a fine cloth so they didn't inadvertently swallow a tiny insect which would be an "unclean" food under the Jewish law. He might then have opened his mouth wide and pretended to swallow something huge, perhaps coughing or gagging on it as He did. His point would have been obvious, and His audience would have understood the joke immediately. Some people were making a huge fuss about little things, but completely missing the really important things. There would be no better way of illustrating this than with an example which used a gross exaggeration and would have made them laugh at the same time. The point was obvious, and many people would have realised their own silliness while laughing at themselves.

While we're talking about camels, you'll probably remember Jesus words "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25). This is such a *gross* exaggeration that many commentators have questioned whether Jesus really said this. Some have suggested that the word for "camel" and the word for "rope" are similar in the language spoken by Jesus, and He might have actually said "it's easier for a **rope** to go through the eye of a needle ..." Others have suggested that "the eye of the needle" was a small door in one of the gates of Jerusalem, and for a camel to get through it's driver had to remove all it's packs and the camel had to crawl through on it's knees. These are interesting ideas, but they miss the point that Jesus is using a gross exaggeration to make the point that for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God is really, really, really, really difficult! In fact, Jesus goes on to say it's **impossible!** "Jesus looked at them and said, "With man **this is impossible**, but with God all things are possible'" (verse 26). We

should make sure we read those last words: “BUT with God ALL THINGS are possible”. The point of the “unreal” exaggeration is that God can do the impossible! He can even save rich people!

One of my favourite examples of Jesus’ humour is His story in Matthew 7:3

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”

The *hyperbole* (or gross exaggeration) in this story is having a “plank” of wood in your eye. Jesus is contrasting a tiny speck of dust with a huge splinter. A speck of dust in the eye is an irritation, but a huge splinter would cause blindness. We might be able to carry on with our work with a speck of dust in our eye, and it would possibly go unnoticed, but a huge splinter would be so obvious and it would cause pain and blindness and bring whatever we are doing to a complete stop. By contrasting these two situations Jesus teaches something very important.

Imagine if you had a speck of sawdust in your eye and someone who was blinded by a huge splinter in their own eye offered to help! Your eyes are such sensitive and important parts of the body that the only person you would want to go near your eye would be someone who was experienced, sensitive and extremely careful. Again, Jesus might have acted this out or used gestures to demonstrate the absurdity of a blind person trying to help with a delicate and sensitive operation like getting a speck of dust out of someone’s eye. No doubt the audience would have laughed, and seen the point immediately. We are all blinded by something - perhaps by prejudice, pride or ignorance - yet we are eager to offer advice to other people about sensitive matters. We rush in to “help” in situations where our advice is more damaging than helpful, and we create bigger problems than the ones we are offering to solve. What a clever way this was for Jesus to get that message across. In laughing at ourselves we are more open to receiving the truth and to being gently guided to a better way.

With this small humorous example Jesus taught many lessons. He taught us that we should not neglect our own problems, because left “untreated” our faults will lead to further damage for ourselves and others. He taught us whenever we notice a tiny fault with someone else it might be because we have grown insensitive to our own major faults. And He reminds us how stupid we look we look to other people when we start to criticise.

You might be able to think of other examples like this, such as “the blind leading the blind” (Matthew 15:14).

2. UNUSUAL OR UNREAL STORY-LINE

An unusual or unreal story-line is an indication that humour may be involved. The whole story may not necessarily be humorous, but Jesus may have used an element of humour in order to direct our attention to the main point. It’s a way of saying “Don’t pay too much attention to the **details** of this story - after all, it’s just a story - because I want you to get the **main point**.”

Remember the story of the ten bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13)? Five were wise, and five were foolish. The five wise ones were well prepared for the wedding, but the unwise ones were unprepared and were not allowed to attend the wedding banquet.

Did you notice anything unusual or “unreal” about the story? In Jesus’ day, weddings were a major event which lasted several days, just as it still is today in many cultures. The wedding was planned to the smallest detail and the planning was done for months or years ahead. Every one involved in the wedding knew their role and what they had to do. Part of the traditional first

century Jewish wedding was a procession at night when the bridal party went to meet the groom. The bridesmaids carried torches for lighting the way, and the torches were used as a feature in a “fire dance”. This was a traditional part of every wedding, and the bridesmaids would have learned and practised the dances well in advance. It was an important part of the celebrations and it’s inconceivable that some detail of it would have been overlooked or forgotten.

Which is exactly the point Jesus is making. Imagine a wedding where the bride “forgot” to purchase flowers, or a bridal dress. Or the parents “forgot” to arrange the wedding banquet. Or the groom “forgot” to purchase rings. It’s so extremely unlikely that if a story began that way we would immediately expect it to be a joke. So it is with this story by Jesus. His audience would immediately have recognised that it was not a true story - that it was a kind of ‘joke’ - a funny story with a punch line. Like all funny stories they would have listened intently, waiting for the punch line. That punch line came in the words in verse 13 “keep watch”, or “be prepared”. This is the whole point of the story. In other words, Jesus is saying “you wouldn’t dream of being part of a wedding without being prepared. Something as important as a wedding takes a great deal of preparation, and you would pay attention to every detail to make sure everything went as it should. How much **more** should you be prepared for the coming of the kingdom of heaven - especially since you do not know the time.”

By making this important point as part of a humorous story Jesus is making sure His audience really gets the point. Humour has a way of relaxing us and “softening” us for the punch line. So Jesus tells a funny story about some bridesmaids who were not prepared as they should have been and then hits us with His point: “so, be prepared!”

Many commentators interpret Jesus’ stories by giving every detail a hidden or “spiritual” meaning. For example, in this story the oil would be a symbol of something in the Christian life (some suggest the Word, others the Spirit). The wise bridesmaids would symbolise faithful Christians and the foolish ones represent Christians who do not have enough of the Word or the Spirit. And so on. However, if we interpret Jesus’ stories this way (i.e. as allegories, with every detail representing something else) then we invariably come against problems. Let’s analyse this allegorical interpretation. Let’s say the oil represents the Word, and at the second coming of Christ (the coming of the bridegroom) some Christians discover they don’t have enough of “the Word”. If this was an allegory about the second coming and the Judgement, how would these unprepared Christians realise they had too little of the Word? By the time they realised it, wouldn’t it be too late to do anything, or go anywhere? So, what does the story mean when they went away to buy some oil? Where could they go? It simply doesn’t fit with what we learn elsewhere about the second coming. Even more disturbing is the attitude of the “wise” bridesmaids. Wouldn’t a faithful Christian want to do absolutely everything within their ability to help their fellow-Christians get as much of the Word as they could? " 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.'" Is this a Christian attitude? Do you think Jesus would be **commending** an attitude that says “I’m well prepared myself - I’ve been reading and studying my Bible for a long time - but I’m not going to lift a finger to help you, you’ll have to go somewhere else”? And how could any Christian say “there is not enough” of the Word (or the Spirit) to go around!?

If we attempt to explain this story by making every detail represent something else we’ll end up with many difficulties. On the other hand, if we see this as a story with just **one main point** (“Be prepared!”) and we recognise the story as being an obvious example of some people who were unprepared in a situation where a great deal of planning was normal, then we can see that Jesus

was using an “unreal” situation to make his point in much the same way as He used *exaggeration* - even impossible exaggeration - to make a point on other occasions.

I expect His audience would have seen the funny side; they would have laughed, and then they would have been able to understand the lesson and apply it to themselves.

Whenever we are faced with a story of Jesus that is difficult to understand, or if people offer a complicated explanation to tell us what it “really” means, we should ask ourselves these questions:

(a) does the story contain some elements or details which seem “unreal” or unusual?

(b) is there some exaggeration here?

(c) is there **one** main point to this story?

(d) could Jesus be using humour to make this point?

Without giving you my ideas on these stories, perhaps you could look at the following stories and ask the questions above about each one of them and see if you come up with some ideas.

Luke 16:1-15 The story of the shrewd manager (or “unjust steward”). It appears that Jesus is commending dishonesty, (e.g. in verse 8 we read “The master commended the dishonest manager ...”) which is extremely unlikely. Is there some humour in this story? If so, why?

Luke 10:30-37 The story of the good samaritan. This story includes the “unlikely” detail that a complete stranger not only helps someone in need but is extravagantly generous at the same time. Is there some exaggeration here? If so, what is Jesus’ point?

Matthew 13:1-9 The story of the sower. The farmer in this story seems almost careless in the way he scatters his precious seeds in places where it cannot grow. If this is exaggeration, what would be the point?

3. PUNCH LINE

I’ve used the term “punch line” a number of times already. It usually means the last line of a joke, the one that really makes us laugh. Without the punch line the joke makes no sense.

Jesus used “punch lines” in a similar way, but with some important differences. In His stories the final line is not the humorous one, but it almost always is the main point. The humour frequently comes earlier - and then the final line will be a serious and hard-hitting point. If we’re not sure what the point of a story is, we should go to the last line.

Another feature of Jesus’ stories is that there will often be an unexpected twist, usually near the end. This tends to catch the listener off-guard, and just when they think they know how the story will end there is a sudden “twist”. By catching the listener off-guard Jesus prepares them for the punch line. The story of the lost (“prodigal”) son is a good example (Luke 15:11-32).

In this story Jesus describes a young man who is greedy, shows no loyalty or respect to his father, is impatient and possibly immoral. Jesus contrasts him with his hardworking and loyal brother. As people listened to this they would probably have thought the younger son was worthless, a good-for-nothing who deserved what he got. But then there is a twist. When he went home and his father accepted him back so readily and enthusiastically, Jesus’ listeners might have been shocked that the father was acting so irresponsibly. Then the older son comes

into the story and reminds us how he has been loyal, hardworking, obedient and trustworthy. We might expect that he was about to get a commendation from Jesus! After all, aren't these all good characteristics? But the hard-working, loyal, responsible son is the one who is criticised in the end, and the one who wasted his father's money on wild living is the one who is rewarded! Finally we get the explanation for the unexplained twist: "We had to celebrate, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

The humour here is that we, the listeners, have been caught out. As responsible, hardworking people we identified with the older son and were critical of the younger irresponsible son. If we graciously accept the point in this story about having a generous spirit and being gracious, then we will realise our mistake and laugh it off.

In the next chapter (Luke 16:1-15) the story of the dishonest manager contains a similar twist. Just when we expect him to be criticised for his dishonesty we read "the master **commended** the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." By now we should have realised that Jesus does not always tell His stories to give us examples of how to behave as Christians (for example, the "wise" bridesmaids were not at all generous, and the shrewd manager was dishonest). Rather, he uses unusual stories to make one main point. The explanation follows immediately after this twist: "the people **of this world** are more shrewd in dealing with **their own kind** ... use **worldly** wealth ...". So, this story is not really a lesson in how Christians should behave in a similar situation, but rather, it leads on to a lesson about being trustworthy. The point Jesus makes about trustworthiness is really the **opposite** of the person in the example He used.

SUMMARY

The main reasons for humour in Jesus' teaching are:

1. It is **memorable**. We usually remember any story which made us laugh.
2. It helps to focus on **one main point**.
3. The listener is 'caught out' and therefore **more receptive** to the lesson.
4. It encourages a **response**. If we laugh at ourselves we're more likely to see the application to our own lives.

Parables [1]

In the previous article in this series we looked at some of the parables in the context of Jesus' use of humour. This article will look at the parables more broadly and suggest some guidelines for interpreting them.

Firstly, what is a parable?

PARABLES

It has been estimated that 35% of Jesus' teachings were in the form of parables.

The word translated "parable" in the English Bible literally means a *comparison* of one thing with another. Jesus frequently used comparisons in His teachings, as in the following examples:

"I am sending you out *like* sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." (Matthew 10:16)

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are *like* whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean." (Matthew 23:27)

The two above comparisons are *similes*. Similes are comparisons which say one thing is *like* another. Metaphors are figures of speech which say one thing *is* another. The following comparisons are *metaphors*.

"You *are* the salt of the earth. ... You *are* the light of the world." (Matthew 5:13-14)

"You snakes! You brood of vipers!" (Matthew 23:33)

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

These metaphors are obviously not meant to be taken literally. They are figures of speech which make comparisons.

A parable is a simile expanded into a story.

INTERPRETING THE PARABLES

Some people make the mistake of taking the comparison in a parable *too far*. By this I mean they make *every* point in the story mean something else and in so doing often miss the *main* point of the story.

Here are some guidelines for understanding parables.

1. Look at the context.

The context will help us understand the **reason** for Jesus telling the story. For example, Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan in order to answer the question "who is my neighbour?" (Luke 10:25-37). Any interpretation of this parable which becomes involved or complicated yet does not answer this question is, therefore, a wrong interpretation.

To understand **context** we need to look at what comes immediately before the parable in the Gospel we are reading. We should also consider *who* Jesus is speaking to (e.g. was it His disciples, the Jewish leaders, or a particular person?), *where* He is speaking (e.g. in the Temple,

or someone's home?) and *why* He is telling this story (e.g. is He trying to *explain* something to His followers, or to *hide* something from people who are trying to trick Him?)

2. What type of story is this?

Jesus often used simple illustrations from everyday life to make a point. He spoke of mustard seeds, leaven, sowing and other common things so that the comparison could be easily understood. (We sometimes call these *similitudes*).

Some of Jesus' parables are short and pithy, while others are complete stories with a beginning, ending and a plot (such as the stories of the lost sheep, the lost/prodigal son, and the ten bridesmaids). We sometimes call these "*true parables*".

Occasionally Jesus used *allegories* which are complex stories where almost every detail is meant to represent something else. There are only two definite examples of these in Jesus' teachings, and they occur together: the story of the sower (Matthew 13:1-23) and the story of the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43). Some people make the mistake of assuming from the fact that Jesus used allegories here to assume *all* His parables were allegories. However, the need for Jesus to explain the meaning of these stories to His disciples (Matthew 13:36) demonstrates that allegories were not typical of how He taught. They were the *exceptions* and not the *rule*.

3. Points of comparison.

We should look for the "points of comparison" in a parable, remembering that there will be a *main point* of comparison but that not every detail has to be a comparison (as in an allegory). In the story of the moneylender (Luke 7:40-42) Jesus tells this story to a pharisee named Simon, knowing that Simon was thinking that if Jesus was truly a prophet He would know that the woman who was wiping His feet with her hair was a "sinner". In the story He describes a moneylender who forgave two debts: one for 50 days wages, and the other for 500 days wages. He asked Simon "which of these debtors will love the moneylender more?" Simon correctly answered "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled". Jesus then went on to make His **comparison** by saying this was *like* Him (a simile), because He had forgiven this woman for "her many sins" and so she "loved much". The point of comparison is that Jesus is *like* the moneylender, and the woman is *like* the person with the big debt. We should not push the comparison beyond this by giving any significance to the numbers 50 or 500, except for the big difference between them.

Similarly, in the longer and more detailed stories we should look for the main points of comparison and not try to find a meaning for every detail. Most parables are built around a *single* comparison.

4. Exaggeration or unrealism.

By now we are familiar with several examples of how Jesus used exaggeration in order to make a point. This also features in His stories.

Jesus was clearly a very good *storyteller* and good storytellers don't hold people's attention by telling them things they already know. That's why Jesus uses common everyday things they will understand, but then adds some humour, uses exaggeration, gives the story a twist and gets the audience involved. Using some *unreal* elements might be part of the humour or exaggeration. However, one of His stories seems very unreal: the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke

16:19-31). I will use this story at the end of this article as an example of how to use all these guidelines to interpret a parable.

5. Humour.

In an earlier article we looked at how the story of the ten bridesmaids contained some humour in order to make the point that we take things like preparing for weddings seriously, so we should take our preparation for the coming of the Kingdom **very** seriously. The humour was to emphasise and reinforce the point, and to highlight the urgency.

In the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-9) there may be a similar use of humour or unreal exaggeration in the way Jesus describes a sower who is almost careless in the way he scatters seed on both good and bad ground, pathways and rocky places. In reality farmers would probably have been much more careful in how they scattered seed. (First century Palestine was a poor country and in some places good ground was scarce.) However, in describing a farmer who scatters seed widely and extravagantly Jesus is making a comparison with God who is generous and provides abundantly: He provides the opportunity to hear His Word to people whether they are likely to be receptive to it or not.

6. End-stress.

The main point of a parable usually comes right at the end and is therefore called the “end-stress”. In the parable of the lost (prodigal) son this comes in the words “we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 11:32). Notice that the words are addressed to the older son. this is significant because Luke tells us earlier that this group of three parables in chapter 15 was in response to the Pharisees and scribes complaining “this man (Jesus) receives sinners and eats with them” (verses 1-2). “**So** He spoke this parable **to them**” (verse 3).

The three parables in this cluster are about “lost things”: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. Each has a similar *end-stress*:

“There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine just persons who need no repentance” (v 7)

“There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (v 10)

“We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (v 32).

The final words in the final parable of the trilogy bring us back to the beginning and tell us that the *older son* in the story was being compared with the scribes and Pharisees to whom the stories were being addressed. You might also notice the *poetic* structure, where the first ending makes mention of the “just persons who need no repentance” and the third ending which is addressed to the son who also felt he was fully justified and needed no repentance.

APPLYING THESE GUIDELINES

As I promised above, we will now look at a difficult parable and apply these guidelines to see if we can discover what Jesus was teaching.

The rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

The first point to remember here is that this is a **story** (a “true parable”) - it is not necessarily meant to be taken *literally*.

Then we must also take note of the **context**: Jesus first addressed 3 parables to the scribes and Pharisees (15:1-3), then He spoke to His disciples (16:1), but within the hearing of the scribes and Pharisees who were still listening (16:14). The story He told His disciples was about a *rich man* who entrusted his goods to a *dishonest* manager. The next story (and the last one in this series of stories) is about a *rich man* who suffers terribly and a poor man who receives great blessings. In each of the earlier parables addressed to the scribes and Pharisees there was also a contrast between two people or objects:

- one lost sheep and ninety-nine others
- one lost coin and nine others
- a lost son and his brother

This tells us that there are meant to be *two points of comparison*: one with the scribes and Pharisees and the other with the “sinners” who had gathered around to listen to Jesus. The next story is addressed to the disciples but is *about* a rich man and his dishonest manager. Luke’s next words tell us that the scribes and Pharisees “were lovers of money” (16:14), and the next story is addressed to them. So here we have two stories about the use of riches joined together with a comment that the people to whom it was addressed “loved money”. The Pharisees looked upon wealth as a sign of God’s blessings and looked upon poverty as a sign of God’s judgment. They were rich, therefore they could argue that they must have pleased God. In doing so Jesus said they “justify themselves” (16:15). They were building a great gulf between themselves and the “sinners”: they considered themselves better and more righteous and used their wealth as “proof” that they had God’s favour. In the previous story He pointed out that they were mismanaging the things God had entrusted to them. Jesus is about to tell another story against their attitude to wealth.

Now, this story is clearly not a true story or meant to be taken literally. It contains some things which are impossible. For example, the rich man is in Hades while Lazarus is in a place called “Abraham’s bosom” which is “**far off**” (v 23) and there is “**a great gulf fixed**” between them (v 26). Yet despite this distance and the great gulf the rich man is able to speak with Abraham. If this story is describing actual conditions then those in heaven must be able to conduct conversations with those in hell, and the dead must be able to travel from heaven to hell, because the rich man asks Abraham to “send Lazarus (to Hades) to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire” (v 24). Here is yet another unreal element: would one drop of water ease his thirst in the slightest? Jesus is again using **exaggeration** to make His point.

The **main point** comes at the end (“the end-stress”). The rich man says to Abraham “if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent”, to which Abraham replies “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” This connects with the main points of the earlier parables (e.g. “There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents”). In the earlier parables the “sinners” were repenting and heaven was rejoicing. In this parable heaven is declaring that the scribes and Pharisees will not repent. The rich man’s *misery* and *hopelessness* in this story is contrasted with the *celebration* and *great rejoicing* in the earlier ones.

in this story Jesus seems to be teaching things about the afterlife which completely contradicts the rest of Scripture about what happens after death. Why does Jesus do this? Well, we learn from Jewish historical sources (such as the first century Jewish historian Josephus) that the Pharisees, although believing in the resurrection, also believed in immortal souls, fiery torments, the righteous and wicked being separated by a great chasm, and a place called the bosom of Abraham. In speaking to them and appealing them to see their real need to repent, Jesus used language which they would understand. He used their own understanding about the afterlife, wrong though it was, to encourage them to see the seriousness of their position. Rather than arguing against their distorted views He uses these very ideas in an effort to persuade them to get right with God before it is too late.

Of course there is an irony here as well: a short time later a *real* Lazarus *did* rise from the dead and they still didn't repent. And then Jesus Himself rose from the dead and most did not repent. So His parable was also prophetic.

Parables [2] - The Dishonest Manager

In the previous article in this series we looked at guidelines for interpreting Jesus' parables. Before moving on to other teaching methods used by Jesus this article will look at another one of the difficult parables or sayings using the guidelines we have learned.

DIFFICULT PARABLES OR SAYINGS OF JESUS

The Dishonest Manager

One of the most difficult to interpret parables is the story of the *dishonest manager* in Luke 16:1-8, and the saying about *God and mammon* which follows it in verses 9-13. We will see that these are actually a parable/story followed by a poem, and the poem does not form part of the story, although it is related to it. First we must put the story in its **context**. In the third article in this series we saw that Jesus addressed His disciples (16:1), but within the hearing of the scribes and Pharisees who were still listening (16:14). The story He told His disciples was about a *rich man* who entrusted his goods to a *dishonest* manager. The next story (and the last one in this series of stories) is about a *rich man* who suffers terribly and a poor man who receives great blessings. Luke tells us that the scribes and Pharisees "were lovers of money" (16:14), and the last story (about the rich man and Lazarus) is addressed to them. So here we have two stories and a poem about the use of riches joined together with a comment that the people to whom it was addressed "loved money". The Pharisees looked upon wealth as a sign of God's blessings and looked upon poverty as a sign of God's judgment. They were rich, therefore they could argue that they must have pleased God. In doing so Jesus said they "justify themselves" (16:15). They considered themselves better and more righteous than "the sinners" and used their wealth as "proof" that they had God's favour. In this story He pointed out that they were *mismanaging* the things God had entrusted to them. But we will see later that there is a "twist" to the story that teaches an even more powerful lesson. In the second article in this series I referred to this story with reference to Jesus use of humour: [Luke 16:1-15 The story of the shrewd manager \(or "unjust steward"\)](#). It appears that Jesus is commending dishonesty, (e.g. in verse 8 we read "The master commended the dishonest manager ...") which is extremely unlikely. Is there some humour in this story? If so, why? This article will also pick up that point and answer the question. Next we notice that there is a *poetic structure* to the story.

THE CHARACTERS – A RICH MAN AND HIS MANAGER

| | |
|-------------|---|
| THE PROBLEM | A. There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. B. So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.' B. The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg-- |
| THE IDEA | C. I know what I'll do |

so that, when I lose my job here,
people will welcome me into their houses.'

THE
SOLUTION

B1. So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied.

The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly,
and make it four hundred.'

B1. Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?'

'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied.

He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'

THE CHARACTERS – A RICH MAN AND HIS MANAGER

A1. The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. We see from this structure that the “climax” is in the central stanza (C) with “The idea”, the announcement of the manager’s plan. It ties together the two halves of the story and provides the clue for its interpretation. When the rich man discovers that his manager, has “wasted” his possessions (the same word occurs in Luke 15:13 about the lost son who “*squandered* his wealth”, and may provide another link in this chain of stories) he immediately dismisses him from his job and calls on him to return the account books. (“Give an account of your management” is almost certainly better translated “Give up your manager’s accounts”, that is “return the account books”.) To our amazement the manager offers no excuses and blames no one. He knows he is guilty and he accepts his fate. Under Jewish law at the time the owner would have been entitled to demand repayment for the losses for which the manager was responsible, or to have him put in prison until a friend or relative paid for the losses (Matthew 18:34). However, the owner does none of this; the manager is not even scolded! **The fact that the owner shows unusual mercy and generosity is very significant.** In stanza 3 the manager wrestles with his problem trying to think of some way to provide for his future, because word of his dishonesty would certainly get out and no one else would employ him. The middle stanza tells us that he has an idea, but we are left in suspense as the drama unfolds. **He has realized that his master is extraordinarily generous and merciful, so he risks everything on a plan is to take advantage of these characteristics.** In the cultural setting this would have been an instant dismissal, so the manager has only a very short time in which to act. He goes to retrieve the account books from where they are kept. News of his dismissal has not yet gotten out, so he has a very short time in which to act. Notice that he speaks with a sense of urgency “Take you bill, sit down *quickly* and write ...” The people who owed money to the master (probably his tenants) would assume the manager continues to act with the owner’s authority. Perhaps they too realized that the owner (their landlord) was a generous man, and so they were not overly surprised by this act of generosity. No doubt they would have been delighted, and may have spread the word quickly. There is no evidence in this story of any conspiracy between the manager and the debtors. We should assume they are honest and acting in good faith. They would have been eager to maintain a good relationship with their landlord, and were not a party to any trickery. They believe the reduction in their debt is legitimate and the manager is still

asserting that he is in authority (note the words “my master” and “he called them in”, i.e. he summoned them with some authority). We should also notice that the manager is being extremely generous and reducing the debts by as much as 50%. This could be another example of *exaggeration* and a touch of *unreality* that should guide us into thinking that Jesus is telling a story that is not meant to be taken literally but uses exaggerated or unreal elements to make a powerful point. We have already learned that these stories were often light-hearted and even humorous. When the manager delivers the accounts to his master, with the freshly made changes, the master is faced with a dilemma. News of his generosity to the debtors (*his* generosity because the manager after all was only acting as the owner’s *agent* in this, so it would seem) would quickly spread through the village and celebrations may already have been underway. If the owner now tells them that this was a mistake and that his dishonest manager has been dismissed, their joy will turn to anger and disappointment. On the other hand, if he says nothing he will be praised as a generous and merciful landlord and will ride on a wave of popular enthusiasm. After all, we’ve already seen that he *is* a generous man so this would be true to character.

The manager risked everything based on what he knew about his master. It’s interesting that several of Jesus’ stories include a reference to how well servants know their masters:

- In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) the lazy servant says of his master “I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid ...” However, he was wrong: his master was not hard or unreasonable. On the other hand, the other servants had presumably gotten to know their master well and had learned from him how to invest, take risks and become prosperous. The servants who *really knew* their master were the ones who benefited. The other one did not know him at all.
- In the parable of the bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13) the groom says to the foolish bridesmaids “I don’t know you” (v. 12).
- In the saying about the narrow way the owner of the house says “I don’t know you” (Luke 13:25).
- In the sermon on the mount Jesus says “Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

The **main point** of this story about the dishonest manager is that *he got to know his master’s characteristics* and knew him to be a merciful and generous man. His only hope for a future lay in relying on that merciful generosity.

The final stanza (the “**end-stress**”) includes an unexpected twist. Jesus’ audience was made up of two types of people. The poorer peasant class might have seen this as a kind of “David and Goliath” story, where the manager acted very cleverly to protect himself from poverty resulting from his dismissal by a rich landlord. It was a triumph of the oppressed over the wealthy. For them there was a ‘twist’ at the end because the manager is criticized as “unrighteous” and a “son of darkness”. On the other hand, the Pharisees might have been surprised that the dishonest manager was commended by his rich master for his shrewdness. For both groups

there was a twist which was designed to make them think about their attitudes, and Jesus cleverly makes His story relevant for His whole audience.

This is not the only story where the central character is *unsavoury* or far from desirable. Jesus tells the story of a man who does not want to be bothered at night in order to help a friend (Luke 11:5-8), and a man who buys a field to get a treasure which rightly belongs to the former owner (Matthew 13:44), and an unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). In these stories Jesus is using the “**how much more**” principle.

- If the widow got what she wanted from this unjust judge **how much more** will God give you what you need.
- If the man got bread from his neighbour in the middle of the night **how much more** will you get from God.
- If this man sold everything he had to buy a field with treasure in it **how much more** should you give up everything in order to obtain the greatest treasure of all.
- If this dishonest manager solved his problem by relying on his master’s mercy and generosity **how much more** will God help you in your crisis when you trust His mercy.

Finally in this story there is a comment about the manager’s “shrewdness” or “wisdom”. He is not praised for his dishonesty and there is no suggestion here that he was taken back into his master’s service. This word refers to his cleverness, specifically his skills in *self-preservation*. There is no doubt that when we answer the call of the Gospel we will be confronted with crises, and verse 16, which follows this story, reminds us of this. “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.” The last words of this verse are hard to understand and are translated in various ways. Some translations have “and everyone is forcing his way into it” while others have “and everyone enters it violently” (or similar). Either way it is difficult to make sense of it. However, the Greek can just as equally be translated “**and everyone because of it is under pressure**” (and this is how it appears in some languages).

So the story of the dishonest manager points us to the *guiding principle* for citizens of the Kingdom who need to make decisions under pressure. The believer must always trust in the grace of God Who is merciful and generous. **This story is really about the nature of God, the predicament of sinful humanity, and grace as the way of salvation.**

The story is then followed by a complex poem (verses 9-13). The *poetic structure* is as follows:

STANZA 1

I tell you, A.
use worldly wealth B.
to gain friends for yourselves, C.
so that when it is gone, B1.
you will be welcomed A1.
into eternal dwellings.

STANZA 2

D. Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much,
E. and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you
F. have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth,
F1. who will trust you with true riches? And if
E1. you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property,
D1. who will give you property of your own?

STANZA 3

G. No servant can serve two masters.
H. Either he will hate the one I. and love the other,
I1. or he will be devoted to the one
H1. and despise the other.
G1. You cannot serve both God and Money."

Without spending too much time analyzing the poetry, I should repeat that the poem here *is not part of the story* but is related to it because it is on a similar theme. It will be seen from this structure that the *central* part is section F "if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth / who will trust you with true riches?" This seems to be aimed squarely at the Pharisees who often misused their worldly wealth and could not, therefore, be entrusted with the Gospel. The difficult part of this poem is in the first stanza. If we see it within its poetic structure we notice that stanzas 1 and 3 correspond. The first stanza refers to worldly wealth (or mammon), and the third refers to money. The first refers to "eternal dwellings" and this corresponds with "serving God" in the third stanza. The difficulty lies in the lines "use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself". The following verses are among the many which teach that generosity, especially to the poor and needy, pleases God and will be rewarded at the resurrection. Luke 14:13-14 "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." Proverbs 19:17 "He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done." Matthew 19:21 "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." It seems that this is the message Jesus is teaching here: we should use what God has given in helping other people. The worldly wealth will then have little importance for us, and even if it runs out we will still have the "true riches" which are much more valuable.

Teaching through miracles [1]

In previous articles we've looked at Jesus' use of poetry, humour, exaggeration and parables or stories as effective ways of teaching. Much of the Gospels are taken up with what Jesus *did* as well as what He *taught* and by looking at a few examples we will see that very often Jesus was teaching through His *actions* as well as His words.

TEACHING THROUGH MIRACLES Each of the Gospels records some of Jesus' miracles. Miracles are described in the New Testament using three words:

1. *Dunamis* = translated generally as power, mighty works, or wonderful works.
2. *teras* = translated as "wonder" this word described the *effect* on a believer of witnessing a mighty work (and is always accompanied by the word "sign"). The English word "miracle" comes from the Latin *miraculum* which means "a wonder".
3. *semeion* = a sign. This word describes the *teaching* intended to be part of a miracle. This is the word preferred by John in his Gospel (John never uses the word *dunamis* and only once uses *teras*. The word "miracle" in John usually translates this word.) In this article we will look at how John records miracles as "signs" which teach important lessons.

The "Signs" in the Gospel of John.

Of all our Lord's miracles John records only eight, and each of these is usually followed by a teaching discourse, such as the conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, which throws light on the significance of the water into wine, or the sermons before and after the healing of the blind man in John 9, and after the healing at Bethsaida in John 5.

The **purpose** for the signs is clearly given in John 20:30-31 - "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. **But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**"

Of these, only five are specifically called "signs" so we could dispute the precise number, but this is not important for this article.

- I. Water into Wine at Cana - " Jesus did this, **the first of his signs...** and manifested his glory" (2:1-11)
- II. Official's son near death at Capernaum - "**the second sign** that Jesus did" (4:46-54)
- III. Healing of a sick man at Pool of Bethesda (5:1-9ff) - *called a "work," not a "sign"* (7:21; cf. 5:17)
- IV. Feeding of the 5000 - " When the people saw **the sign** which he had done..." (6:1-14ff)
- V. Walking on water (6:16-21) (*not called a "sign" , and does not have the same characteristics as the other signs in John, but seems to be linked to the feeding of the 5,000*)
- VI. Healing of a man born blind (9:1-7ff) - " How can a sinner do **such signs?**" (9:16)
- VII. Lazarus raised from the dead (11:1-45), - " they heard he had done **this sign**" (12:18)
- VIII. The catch of fish (21:1-14) - (*not called a "sign" , but has the characteristics of one*)

We will look at one of the miracles in John's Gospel to see how we can determine its meaning as a "sign".

The man healed at Bethesda (John 5:1-15)

Like the parables, a key to understanding the significance of a miracle will often come at **the end**, or in the teaching that follows it. After healing a man at Bethesda John said that Jesus "found him at the temple and said to him 'See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.'" This might seem an odd instruction because elsewhere in the gospel (9:2-3) Jesus explicitly rejects the common Jewish assumption that all sickness was the result of sin. However, Jesus is clearly telling this man that there was something in his *behaviour* or *attitude* which was sinful and which had prevented him from getting better.

The clue, I believe, is in verse 6 where Jesus asks the man "do you want to get well?" It might seem to us like a strange question because surely a man who had been at this pool for 38 years where people came hoping to be healed would want to be well. Yet the question directs him to confront his real issues. Note that in the following verse this man does not specifically answer Jesus' question. "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." His response contains two *excuses* why he has been in this condition for so long, but *avoids answering* Jesus' question. Both excuses were false.

1. I have no one to help me. How did this man get to and from the pool each day? Who brought him his food? Who helped him to the bathroom? In the course of 38 years he must have received help in many matters. Is it true there was "no one to help" or was he making an excuse? Indirectly this excuse puts the blame on other people and their lack of compassion for his condition.

2. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me. Surely at least *once* in 38 years he could have made some arrangement to be the first in! If he was desperate to be healed he could have placed himself so close to the pool that he could have almost guaranteed to be the first. It is extremely unlikely that during such a long time he could never manage to be the first person into the pool. Again he blames others for his condition: "someone else goes down ahead of me". He seems to think that these other people are unfair and have no concern for the fact that he's been waiting a long time and it's his turn.

Verse 6 emphasises that it was after Jesus had learned "that he had been in this condition for a long time" that He asked him "Do you want to get well?" Jesus picked up that there was something wrong here – there must have been a reason why this man was still here after so long a time. His answer to the Lord's question reveals his *negativity* and his refusal to accept responsibility for his life. If something is wrong it must be someone else's fault! This negativity is the sin that Jesus referred to later when He said "stop sinning". If he doesn't change this attitude "something worse may happen". This in itself would be a valuable lesson for us to learn about our attitudes to life and to others.

The background to the incident reveals that there was a wider negativity in the community, in fact, in the Jewish way of thinking.

· They believed that God only healed "from time to time" (v. 4). Incidentally, this verse does not appear in many modern translations, or, if it does, it appears as a footnote. The reason for this is that it was almost certainly an explanatory note made by an early scribe

which then accidentally was included in later copies as though it was part of the original text. It explains what the Jews *believed* about the healing properties of the water, and not the way God *actually* healed people.

· They believed that God only healed one person at a time – the first one into the pool when the water was disturbed.

· They believed that only the *first* person in was healed – in other words, that God had a precise “rule” for who could be healed and He did not deviate from this.

The miracle introduces the main topic of the rest of chapter 5, which is that Jesus is the final judge of what is sinful and what is not. What is sinful, and what is righteous in God’s eyes is determined by Jesus, not by the Torah (the Law), or by human interpretations of it. This sign was designed to get a reaction from both the recipient and onlookers, pointing to *their spiritual state*. Will they receive Jesus, put their faith in Him, and receive ‘life’, or will they choose to disregard the sign’s message and remain ‘in darkness’.

In the next article in this series I will look at other examples of how Jesus used miracles as opportunities to teach important lessons.

A **WATER INTO WINE.** 2:1-11.

- a. The background - Nathanael's faith (1:49-51).
- b. In Galilee (v. 1).
- c. " The Third Day" (v. 1).
- d. Waterpots " up to the brim" (v. -7).
- e. Glory manifested (*ephanerose*, v. 11-).

B **THE OFFICIAL’S SON.** 4:46-50.

- a. The background. Rejection (vv. 43, 44).
- b. " After two days" (v. 43).
- c. His son was " sick" (*esthenei*, v. 46).
- d. " At the point of death" (v. 47). " Death" only here, and in " B" below.
- e. " The fever left him" (*apheken*, v. 52).

C **HEALING THE SICK MAN AT BETHESDA.** 5:1-47.

- a. In Jerusalem (v. 1).
- b. The Pool. Bethesda (v. 2).
- c. A longstanding case, " thirty-eight years" (v. 5).
- d. On the Sabbath (v. 9).
- e. " Afterward Jesus findeth him" (v. 14).

- f. "Sin no more" (v. 14). Sin, only here and in " C" , below
- g. " My Father worketh hitherto, and I work" (v. 17).

D THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND. 6:1-14.

- a. One of the only two " signs" (together with *D*) recorded in the other Gospels
- b. " Jesus went up to the mountain" (v. 3).
- c. " Many disciples went back" (v. 66).

D WALKING ON THE WATER. 6:15-21.

- a. One of the only two " signs" (with *D*) recorded in the other Gospels
- b. " Jesus departed again into the mountain" (v. 15).
- c. " Many of the people believed" (7:31).

C HEALING THE MAN BORN BLIND. 9:1-41.

- a. In Jerusalem (8:59; 9:1).
- b. The Pool. Siloam (vv. 7, 11).
- c. A longstanding case, " from birth" (v. 1).
- d. On the Sabbath (v. 14).
- e. " When He had found him" (v. 35).
- f. " Who did sin?" (v. 2. Cp. vv. 24, 25, 31, 34). Sin, only here, and in " C" , above.
- g. " I must work the works of Him that sent Me" (v. 4).

B THE RAISING OF LAZARUS. 11:1-44.

- a. The background. Rejection (10:31, 39; 11:8).
- b. " Jesus abode two days where He was" (v. 6).
- c. Lazarus was sick (*esthenei*, v. 2).
- d. " Lazarus is dead" (v. 14). " Death" only here, and in " B" above.
- e. " That ye may believe" (v. 15).
- f. " Let him go" (*aphete*, v. 44).

A THE CATCH OF FISH. 21:1-14.

- a. The background. Thomas' unbelief (20:24-29).
- b. In Galilee (v. 1).
- c. " The third time" (v. 14).
- d. Net full, to the last fish (vv. 8, 11).
- e. The Lord manifested (*ephanerothe*, v. 14).

Teaching through miracles [2] - Important Features of the Healing Miracles

In the last article I said we would next look at other examples of how Jesus used miracles as opportunities to teach important lessons. In this article we will continue to look at some features of Jesus' healings which stand out in the Gospels.

IMPORTANT FEATURES OF THE HEALING MIRACLES

One important feature of Jesus' healings is that there was *no one method* of healing people.

- Some were healed by a touch
- some with only words
- some were healed without Jesus even being present
- one blind man was healed after Jesus made a paste from mud while other blind people were healed without this. By looking closely at some of these healings we learn some interesting things about Jesus Himself.

1. Jesus reached out to people at their point of need. Under Jewish law lepers were to be isolated from the rest of the community. Being a contagious disease there were good reasons for this law. The isolation affected every aspect of life and sufferers of the disease were excluded from worshipping at the Temple or in local synagogues, and from family and community life in general. Some synagogues even had a little room attached on the side with a small opening high up. Lepers could go into this room and *hear* the synagogue service through the opening but could not see it or participate in any way. While this was designed to allow them to have some kind of religious experience, it probably heightened their sense of isolation. Lepers often formed their own groups living outside cities. It was a devastating illness, not only for its physical symptoms but for the isolation from friends, family and community which was the result. The Jewish Rabbis had made a rule that a leper was not to approach anyone within 4 cubits (approximately 2 metres, or 6 feet). People would have been afraid of lepers – afraid that they too might contract the disease and suffer all the terrible consequences. People would not have gone near them and avoided touching them at any cost. One commentator has written: “No other disease reduces a human being for so many years to so hideous a wreck.” In Luke 5:12 we read of a man who was “covered with leprosy”. This appears to be a technical term describing an aggravated case of the worst degree (you might know that Luke was a medical practitioner and often described sicknesses using medical terms). He appealed to Jesus “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean”. All three of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke are called ‘synoptic’ because they are *similar*) record this incident and mention that he asked to be “clean” not “healed”, probably because the isolation of being ‘unclean’ was more unbearable than the physical symptoms of the disease itself. This emphasises the terrible loneliness associated with this disease. All the Gospel writers then record that “Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man” (Matt 8:3; Mark 1:41; Luke 5:13). They don’t say merely that “Jesus touched him”, but providing the added detail that “He reached out” lets us know that the leper was keeping his distance but that Jesus broke through that barrier and **intentionally** did something that perhaps no one else would dream off doing. Here was a man who probably hadn’t felt the touch of another person for a long time, and **Jesus reaches out to meet him at that point of need**. We can almost hear the gasps of alarm from others around them as Jesus did the unthinkable. Imagine – the first human touch he had felt in so long, and it was to change his life forever. Not only was he healed immediately of

his terrible disease, he could now be restored to his family and community. There is a similar example in Mark 5:25-34 and Luke 8:43-48 of a woman who had a condition which made her unclean under Jewish law. The nature of her 'uncleanness' meant she could still live in her own home, but anyone who drank from the same cup or sat in the same chair would also become unclean for the remainder of the day and then have to undergo a 'purification' ritual. After a period of time it would have become more and more inconvenient for people to visit her regularly and she too would possibly have become increasingly isolated and lonely. In this particular case Mark tells us that "she had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse" (verse 26). On the other hand Luke, who was a doctor, simply tells us that "no one could heal her" (verse 43). Here is a little insight into the *human* aspect of the *inspiration* of the Scriptures as Mark tells us what he thought of the doctors who took all her money while her condition worsened, while Dr Luke gives a different perspective as a member of the profession which was unable to help. As a result of her 'uncleanness' any person this woman touched would also have become unclean. This meant she could not go out to places where there would be crowds (such as the market) for fear that she accidentally touched someone. The story which follows is a remarkable example of faith as the sick woman goes to great lengths to touch Jesus. The fact that she came up **behind** Him in the crowd and wanted only to touch Him discreetly, and then tried to slip away unnoticed, hints at the likelihood that she wanted to avoid being seen in a crowd by anyone who knew her (and knew she shouldn't be there because of her 'unclean' condition). Her faith was great because she believed all she had to do was to touch the Lord, without Him even knowing, and she could be healed. What follows is amazing. Jesus asked "who touched me?" His disciples immediately pointed out that this was a strange question because they were in a crowd and many people were brushing against Him. But Jesus knew that someone had **deliberately** touched Him – He was able to recognize when He was in the presence of faith. Mark tells us that "Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it" (verse 32). This tells us that He searched for her, determined not to let this faith go unnoticed and unrewarded. I believe there are at least three reasons why He did this:

1. This kind of faith was rare, and Jesus wanted her to be an example to others. In fact, we read sometime later that "people brought all their sick to him and begged him to let the sick just touch the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed." (Matthew 14:35-36). I am sure that the story of what this woman had done had spread, and others were encouraged to follow her example of faith.
2. It was important that she tell her testimony. At first she came "trembling at His feet" but after telling her story she was able to "go in peace" (Luke 8:47-48). It's important to share our testimony about what Jesus has done for us, because it reinforces our faith and gives others something that they can relate to.
3. Because she had suffered this condition for so long (12 years) it's possible that other people might have been skeptical or unconvinced if she'd told them later that she was now well. In order for her life to become normal again it was important that everyone know that she was cured. Jesus' healings are *complete* and He does more than we expect. Not only did He cure her physical condition, He also ensured that everyone knew of it so that she would no longer be isolated and lonely.

Jesus then said she was "freed from suffering" (Mark 5:29,34). I think this means that she had discovered that **faith is the key to freedom**: "your **faith** has healed you. Go in peace and be

freed from your suffering." She was "free" from suffering because it no longer had any hold over her. Faith enables us to be released from whatever holds us in bondage.

One last point about this story: Matthew and Luke both tell us that this woman had suffered this condition for **twelve years** and they both tell us that this happened while Jesus was on his way to heal the daughter of the synagogue ruler who was **twelve years old**. When the Gospel writers give us details of this nature it is almost always for a good reason and I'm certain that we are meant to notice a connection. Perhaps you will be able to think of a reason why Mark and Luke make this point about the age of the little girl and the length of time the woman suffered from her sickness. Here are some things to consider:

- The sick woman was cut off from attending the synagogue at about the same time as the synagogue ruler (Jairus) was celebrating the birth of a daughter. Perhaps Jairus was the synagogue ruler at the time who had to make the decision that she was not allowed to attend meetings there. The woman was mourning being cut off from religious life, while Jairus was celebrating a new life.
- The sick woman was healed, and therefore 'made clean' and allowed back into the synagogue, at the same time as Jairus was losing his daughter. She was celebrating her *new* life at the same time as Jairus was mourning the loss of a life.
- The synagogue, and the Jewish law, was unable to help either of them in their greatest needs.
- Only Jesus could bring life and freedom into their lives. What Jesus was able to do for them both stands in contrast to what the synagogue was unable to do for either.

In the next article in this series I will look at some more features of Jesus' miracles.

Teaching through miracles [3] - Categories of Miracles

The Gospels record about 36 miracles performed by Jesus, as well as numerous other references to Him healing the sick, casting out demons, and performing “signs and wonders”. The list below groups the recorded miracles together into their main categories of miracles.

| | <i>Matthew</i> | <i>Mark</i> | <i>Luke</i> | <i>John</i> |
|-----------------------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Healing Miracles | | | | |
| Man in Synagogue | 1:25-36 | 4:33-35 | | |
| Peter’s Mother-in-law | 8:14-15 | 1:30-31 | 4:38-39 | |
| Man with leprosy | 8:2-4 | 1:40-42 | 5:12-13 | |
| Roman Centurion’s Servant | 8:5-13 | 7:1-10 | | |
| Gadarene Demoniac(s) | 8:28-34 | 5:1-15 | 8:27-35 | |
| Paralysed man | 9:2-7 | 2:3-12 | 5:18-25 | |
| Exorcism of Mary Magdalene | 8:2 | | | |
| Haemorrhaging Woman | 9:20-22 | 5:25-29 | 8:43-48 | |
| Two Blind Men | 9:27-31 | | | |
| Mute & Possessed Man | 9:32-33 | | | |
| Man with shrivelled hand | 12:10-13 | 3:1-5 | 6:6-10 | |
| Blind, Mute & Possessed Man | 12:22 | 11:14 | | |
| Canaanite Womans Daughter | 15:21-28 | 7:24-30 | | |
| Deaf Mute | 7:31-37 | | | |
| Blind Man at Bethsaida | 8:22-26 | | | |
| Demon-possessed boy | 17:14-18 | 9:17-27 | 9:38-43 | |
| Crippled Woman | 13:11-13 | | | |
| Man With Dropsy | 14:1-4 | | | |
| Ten Men With Leprosy | 17:11-19 | | | |
| Two Blind Men | 20:29-34 | 10:46-52 | 18:35-43 | |
| High Priest’s Servant | 22:50-51 | | | |

| | | | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------|
| Official's Son at Capernaum | 4:46-54 | | | |
| Sick man at Pool of Bethesda | 5:1-9 | | | |
| Healing of Blind Man | 9:1-41 | | | |
| Raising the dead | | | | |
| Widow's son at Nain | 7:11-15 | | | |
| Jairus's daughter | 9:18-19, 23-25 | 5:22-24, 38-42 | 8:41-42, 49-56 | |
| Lazarus | 11:1-44 | | | |
| Nature miracles | | | | |
| Calming the storm | 8:23-27 | 4:37-41 | 8:22-25 | |
| Walking on water | 14:25 | 6:48-51 | 6:19-21 | |
| Fig tree withered | 21:18-22 | 11:12-14, 20-25 | | |
| Coin in fish's mouth | 17:24-27 | | | |
| First catch of fish | 5:1-11 | | | |
| Second catch of fish | 21:1-11 | | | |
| Abundance miracles | | | | |
| Water into wine | 2:1-11 | | | |
| Feeding five thousand | 14:15-21 | 6:35-44 | 9:12-17 | 6:5-13 |
| Feeding four thousand | 15:32-38 | 8:1-9 | | |

This article looks at some of the important things Jesus taught through His miracles.

1) The role of Faith

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke are called “synoptic” because they are *similar*) sometimes emphasise that *faith* is necessary *before* someone can receive a miracle. For example, the following three verses in Matthew reveal that someone was healed *because of their faith*.

- It will be done just as you believed it would. (Matthew 8:13)
- According to your faith will it be done to you. (Matthew 9:29)

- Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted. (Matthew 15:28)

Mark records similar words:

- ‘When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, " Son, your sins are forgiven." ’ (Mark 2:5). Notice that in this miracle it was not the faith of the person being healed, but *the faith of his friends* which Jesus found irresistible.
 - “He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith.” (Mark 6:5-6). This incident demonstrates that Jesus could not do miracles where there was *no faith*.
 - Mark also records occasions where *barriers had to be overcome* through a *determined struggle* in order for someone to experience a miracle.
- “Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on”. (Mark 2:4)
- The woman with a haemorrhage – see my explanation of this in the previous article in this series (no. 6).
- In the story of the healing of the daughter of the Canaanite woman national or racial prejudice was a barrier and the woman had to be very persuasive in convincing Jesus to heal her daughter^[1]. Matthew includes Jesus response: " Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted" (Matthew 15:28). So what Mark sees as a *struggle to overcome a barrier* Matthew sees as great *faith*.
- On one occasion Jesus’ disciples were unable to heal a demon-possessed boy, but his father persisted and despite his own doubts, or lack of faith, he asked Jesus for help in overcoming the barrier of *insufficient faith*. Jesus said " Everything is possible for him who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, " I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:22-24).
- Mark also records how the crowds tried to silence a blind man who persisted in asking Jesus for a miracle. However, despite the opposition he was healed and Jesus said “your faith has healed you” (Mark 10:47-52).
- In each of these incidents *faith* is related to overcoming barriers such as *physical limitations, prejudice, social taboos, doubts* and *opposition from others*.

John, on the other hand, tends to emphasise that miracles often *produced* faith rather than being the *result* of it. There is no contradiction here. John also knows about the importance of faith for miracles to happen (e.g. John 4:50; 11:40), but he tells us that his whole point in describing Jesus’ miracles is “that you may *believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by *believing* you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31. The words “believe” and “have faith” are the same in Greek). In many of the *signs* recorded in John Jesus takes the initiative, rather than someone coming to him in faith. In fact, when He healed a man at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-9) John makes the point that the man who was healed “had no idea” who healed him (v. 13). So, miracles might be the *result* of faith or they are performed by the Lord in order to *produce* faith.

2) Jesus acted out of compassion for people. On a few occasions we read words like these: · When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36) · When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. (Matthew 14:14) · Jesus had compassion on them. (Matthew 20:34) · Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand ... (Mark 1:41) · "I have compassion for these people". (Mark 8:2) However, it is clear that Jesus' motivation was not compassion alone and there is evidence in the Bible that He did not heal everyone with whom he came in contact. For example, we read that He once visited the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. "Here a **great number** of disabled people used to lie - the blind, the lame, the paralyzed" (John 5:3). However, we only read of **one man** being healed here. Later, in Acts 3:1-10, we read of how Peter and John healed a crippled man at the entrance to the Temple in Jerusalem. This man had been crippled from birth and was taken to the Temple *every day*. Jesus must have passed every time He went into the Temple, yet He never healed him!

Jesus **didn't** heal everyone.

3) Lessons from "abundance" miracles. The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels and it is followed in John's Gospel by a sermon about the "bread of life". Before the feeding of the 4,000, which was similar, Jesus said " I have *compassion* for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way." (Matthew 15:32). It seems from these accounts that the primary reason for these miracles was *compassion*, although the fact that a sermon follows immediately after it shows that Jesus took the opportunity to use the occasion to *teach* something from it (although teaching may not have been the *primary* objective). In addition to the teaching about the *bread of life* which follows this incident, there are several other lessons which we can discover from the incident itself.

1. First we read that the disciples were aware of a *problem* and came to Jesus with a suggestion:
 - ... it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. " This is a remote place," they said, " and it's already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."
2. Jesus responds that the disciples themselves should *do something* to solve the problem:
 - But he answered, " You give them something to eat."
3. The disciples are amazed by this suggestion, and tell Jesus that *they do not have the resources* to solve the problem.
 - They said to him, " That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?"
4. Jesus tells them that they should *first see what they have* before deciding they can do nothing:
 - " How many loaves do you have?" he asked. " Go and see." 5. A little, if it is put in the hands of Jesus, can achieve a lot.
 - Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied

We learn from this incident that there are two attitudes to problems:

I. The disciples said “Send them away”. One response to a problem is to try to shift it somewhere else.

II. Jesus said “You give them something to eat” – in other words, “**You** do something!” Jesus approach to the problem was to *take responsibility* and *see what can be done*. We also learn that there are two attitudes to resources:
I. The disciples said “we don’t have enough”. A common approach to problems is to say “we don’t have the resources to fix this” and we use this as an excuse to *do nothing*.

II. Jesus said “Go and see”. In other words, rather than say “we don’t have enough” we should first see what we do have, and then do something with it. Most importantly, we learn from this incident that *in the hands of Jesus* even our very limited resources can achieve amazing things.

The miracle of turning water into wine at the marriage in Cana can be puzzling. It appears to be an unnecessary miracle, and the person who was helped the most was the host of the wedding who seems to have been “rescued” by Jesus out of a situation caused by bad planning. It also appears to be “indulgent” insofar as Jesus wasn’t feeding *hungry* people but providing something to drink for people who had already been feasting for some time. It is even stranger that this was Jesus’ *first* miracle. Why did He reveal His miraculous powers in such a way? There are several possibilities, including:
a. Jesus *announced His ministry* with a miracle which declared that His message was about *abundance* and *God’s overflowing generosity* to mankind.
b. The water in this miracle came from storage vessels “the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing” (John 2:6), and Jesus is hereby declaring that His ministry will get rid of the lifeless rituals and man-made rules which held the people in spiritual bondage and will replace it with something joyous.
c. Jesus ministry is not only about meeting human *needs* but is about *celebration* and *exuberance* and includes elements which are totally *unexpected*. Our God is a God of surprises!

The next article will look at what Jesus taught about *the Kingdom of God* through His miracles, and this will lead into looking at Jesus’ other teachings about the Kingdom.

[1] The woman in this story was a Gentile living outside the Land and was obviously very aware of the Jewish prejudice against non-Jews. In arguing with her about whether He should do a miracle I am convinced that Jesus Himself did not have this racial prejudice but, knowing her faith, He was simply reflecting the usual Jewish attitude in order to get a *faith response* from her.

The Gospel of the Kingdom [1]

This article will look at what Jesus taught about *the Kingdom of God* through His healing miracles. In later articles we will look at Jesus' other teachings about the Kingdom.

Jesus Himself specifically said that some of His miracles were to teach about the Kingdom of God. Matthew tells the story of how a man who was demon-possessed, blind and mute was brought to Jesus "and Jesus healed him so that he could both talk and see" (Matthew 12:22). When the Pharisees heard this they said "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons." Jesus then said:

" Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But **if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.** (verses 25-28). (Luke recorded it this way: "But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you." Luke 11:20).

His last words quoted above show us that Jesus' healing miracles were evidence that "**the kingdom of God has come upon you**".

Elsewhere in the Gospels we notice that teaching about the Kingdom of God went hand-in-hand with healing. For example:

- Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the **kingdom**, and **healing** every disease and sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23)
- Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the **kingdom** and **healing** every disease and sickness. (Matthew 9:35)
- When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the **kingdom** of God and to **heal** the sick. (Luke 9:1-2. See also Matthew 10:1-7)
- The crowds ... followed him. He welcomed them and spoke to them about the **kingdom** of God, and **healed** those who needed healing. (Luke 9:11)
- When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. **Heal** the sick who are there and tell them, 'The **kingdom** of God is near you.' (Luke 10:8-9)

When John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus to ask if He was "the one who was to come" Jesus sent them back to John with this message: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor" (Matthew 11:2-6). His healing miracles and His preaching of the good news combined to provide irrefutable evidence that He was indeed the one John was expecting.

In later articles we will look at the various things Jesus taught about the Kingdom, but in this article I want to consider what Jesus meant when He said "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you". There are two questions we need to ask about this:

1. What did Jesus mean when He said “the Kingdom of God has come upon you” (or “to you”)?
2. How did Jesus healing miracles demonstrate that “the Kingdom of God has come”?

1. The coming of the King and the coming of the Kingdom

Jesus was born to be King. The angel who announced His birth to Mary said: “The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” (Luke 1:32-33). “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” (Matthew 2:1-2). At His trial before Pilate the governor asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” “Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied. (Matthew 27:11).

The Greek word translated “kingdom” in English is *basileia* which is primarily an *abstract* noun, meaning “sovereignty, royal power, dominion,” and then secondarily a *concrete* noun, meaning the territory or people over whom a king rules. In other words, the Kingdom of God is primarily the sphere of God's rule, or where His rule is acknowledged, rather than a geographical territory. From the Gospels we discover that **the Kingdom of God was present in the person, teaching and works of Jesus**. So, when Jesus said “the Kingdom of God has come upon you” or “the Kingdom of God is among you”, He was explaining that wherever He is present and where His authority is acknowledged the Kingdom of God is present.

However, there were other occasions when Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is *still future*, at least in the sense of a fuller reality. We'll come back to those later.

2. The King's authority

On one occasion, when Jesus healed a paralysed man he said “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . .” He said to the paralytic, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home” (Mark 2:10-11). In other words, the healing of the man was *evidence* that Jesus had **authority** to forgive sins. The statement had just been made that only God has this authority (verse 7), so this miracle was a clear and intentional demonstration that Jesus was acting with God's authority.

Mark uses an interesting expression when he tells the story about a deaf mute who was healed by Jesus. “There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man.” (Mark 7:32). It is significant that Mark uses the expression “could hardly talk” because this expression occurs only **once** in the Greek translation of the Old Testament used by the disciples, and that one time is in Isaiah 35:6. Isaiah is describing the wonders of the Kingdom of God and the age to come and says “the **mute tongue** will shout for joy”. This is exactly the expression which Mark uses, telling us that with the coming of Jesus the Kingdom-age had begun^[1].

The connection between sin and suffering

If Jesus healed someone in order to show He had “authority to forgive sins”, does this suggest that disease is the result of sin? Many of the Jews in Jesus' time believed that such a link existed,

and that if someone was sick it was evidence that they had sinned. Good health, on the other hand, was considered to be evidence of a godly life.

In John 9:1-3 we read about a time when Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, " Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" " Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, " but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life".

This answer by Jesus makes it clear that disabilities such as blindness are not a punishment for sin, although this was the popular Jewish belief at the time. However, it is equally clear that a connection exists between sin and suffering of all kinds, including disease. In the verses we looked at in the beginning of this article (Matthew 12) we saw that Jesus was speaking about two "kingdoms":

- the kingdom of Satan
- the Kingdom of God.

Disease (described here as being possessed by demons) belongs to the kingdom of Satan. When Jesus healed diseases this was a direct attack on the Kingdom of Satan. In a similar way, when Jesus sent out His 72 disciples He said "Heal the sick and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you.' (Luke 10:9). The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name" (verse 18). Healing the sick (verse 9) and casting out demons (verse 18) were apparently related things, if not the same, and they often go hand in hand. Jesus then said to them "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (verse 19). He clearly meant that healing the sick (or casting out demons) was a direct attack on the kingdom of Satan.

These verses tell us that disease belongs to "the kingdom of Satan" and that healing is part of the Kingdom of God. Disease came into the world as a result of Adam and Eve's sin. People suffer from diseases as a result of the sinful condition of the world, not as a direct punishment of their own sins. So, when Jesus healed diseases He was demonstrating that His work was to change the sinful condition of the world: to overcome sin and all its consequences; to put an end to what He called 'the kingdom of Satan". This work began when Jesus came into the world, and the work of overthrowing Satan's kingdom and establishing God's Kingdom therefore began with the presence of the King in the earth.

Matthew makes an interesting reference to an Old Testament prophet when recording how Jesus healed people.

When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

" He took up our infirmities
and carried our diseases."

(Matthew 8: 16-17 quoting Isaiah 53:4 which says "he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows).

We usually think of Jesus' sufferings described in Isaiah 53 as being for *our sins* and this is suggested in Isaiah 53:11 ("my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their

iniquities [sins]”).) However, Matthew’s use of this verse shows that Jesus’ work is to remove sin *and its effects* (including disease and suffering) and that this work had already begun, even before the cross.

The work of establishing God’s Kingdom has begun, although it is not yet completed. So, we can say that the Kingdom of God has “come unto you” but is not yet fully a reality. That is why He taught us to pray “Your Kingdom come”, so that we pray that the work He began will be completed.

ENDNOTES:

[1] Another time, Jesus was reading from the Scriptures in a synagogue. Luke said:

The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place [Isaiah 61:1-2] where it is written:

" The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, " Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:17-19)

“Recovery of sight for the blind” was just one type of miraculous healing which Jesus did. When Jesus gave sight to the blind it was evidence that this Isaiah Scripture was fulfilled with the coming of Jesus and the Kingdom-age had dawned.

The Gospel of the Kingdom [2] - Preaching the good news of the kingdom

Previous articles in this series have looked mainly at **how** Jesus taught. Using that as a foundation we will now look at **what** Jesus taught.

This article will look at Jesus' *overall* message and later articles will deal with His teaching about specific matters.

Here is how one Gospel writer summarises what Jesus taught:

"From that time on Jesus began to preach, "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.**" ... Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, **preaching the good news of the kingdom**, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:17, 23)

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, **preaching the good news of the kingdom** and healing every disease and sickness. (Matthew 9:35)

The Kingdom of God was not only *central* to Jesus' message, it was His whole message!

The promise of the Kingdom When the angel appeared to Mary to announce that a son would be born to her, he said: " Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." (Luke 1:30-33). From the outset it was clear that Jesus was born to be a King, and Luke's words are so similar to the promise God made to King David hundreds of years before that we can be certain that the angel was referring to this promise.

" 'The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.' " (2 Samuel 7:11-16).

Jesus was born to be King on David's throne over the kingdom of Israel. Yet **the prophets never referred to Israel as the kingdom of God**. It's true that God once said to the prophet Samuel, when Israel wanted a king like the other nations, "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king." (1 Samuel 8:7)[1]. Yet the first time the phrase "kingdom of God" is used in the Bible is in Matthew 12:28 when Jesus said "the kingdom of God has come upon you".

Expecting the Kingdom

The Old Testament prophets looked forward to a "coming Age" when God would put a new heart and new Spirit in His people; when righteousness, justice, prosperity and peace would be the order of the day; and when all the nations would come to know God and walk in His ways. Perhaps Daniel is the clearest in describing how "the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed" and "it will crush all those [previous] kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever." (Daniel 2:44). In another vision Daniel sees that "the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over

to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.” (7:27).

To the prophets time was divided into two major periods: the time before the coming of the Messiah, and the Age to Come. The coming of the Messiah would bring about changes on a major scale and restore creation to the way God intended it to be.



The prophets did see, however, that Israel had a special role to play in the establishment of God’s kingdom and that the Messiah would sit on the throne of David.

“For to us a child is born,

to us a son is given,

and the government will be on his shoulders.

... Of the increase of his government and peace

there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne

and over his kingdom,

establishing and upholding it

with justice and righteousness

from that time on and forever.” (Isa 9:6-7).

Daniel’s prophecy includes a prediction of the time frame “to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy” which would climax in the coming of “the Anointed One, the ruler” (Daniel 9:20-28). The period of time would be measured as “seventy sevens” and begin “from the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem”. By the time of Jesus, approximately 490 years later, there may very well have been an expectation that Daniel’s “seventy sevens” were about to end and the Anointed One would come.

Entering the Kingdom

The promise of the prophets was now on the threshold of becoming a reality. Israel was being occupied by a foreign power – the Romans – and people were becoming excited, perhaps even impatient. On one occasion, after Jesus had miraculously fed 5,000 people, they said " Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come

and make him king by force, dismissed the crowd, made His disciples leave and then He withdrew again to a mountain by himself (John 6:14-15; cp. Mark 6:45).

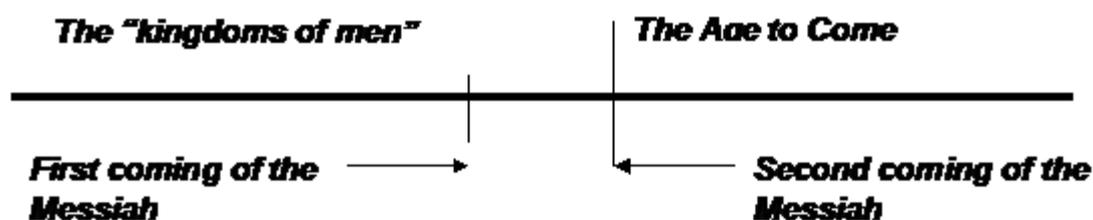
Jesus was not the kind of King they wanted – and this was not the kind of Kingdom He came to rule over. The Jews expected a Messiah who would overthrow the Romans and restore Israel to its former position of greatness. Surely anyone who could feed 5,000 from a few loaves of bread must be the Messiah and would have the power to do all this! Even after Jesus' death and resurrection His disciples were still expecting Him to do something like this. " Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" they asked Him (Acts 1:6).

However, every thing Jesus taught about the Kingdom was radically different from these expectations. The sermon on the mount begins with the words "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). To Pontius Pilate Jesus said " My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place" (John 18:36).

Nicodemus, who is described as "Israel's teacher" and a member of the Jewish ruling council (John 3:1,10), came to Jesus one night to question Him because it was obvious from His miraculous signs that God was with Jesus. Jesus took the opportunity to teach Nicodemus about how to enter the Kingdom of God. He said "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (v. 3) and "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (v. 5).

The Jews believed they were God's special people and that the Messiah would restore them as a great nation. But Jesus taught something radically different: He taught that they needed to **change** in order to receive the Kingdom – "**Repent**, for the kingdom of heaven is near" – and that the Kingdom would not be established by force, but by people who were "poor in spirit". Jews would not inherit the Kingdom of the Messiah simply because they were Jews, descendants of Abraham. They needed to be "born again" – their Jewish citizenship meant nothing – and become a *different kind of person*.

In retrospect we now know that there are to be **two comings of the Messiah** and that Jesus did not fulfill everything that the Old Testament prophets foresaw about the Kingdom at His first coming. We can see now that there are three major periods of time, not two.



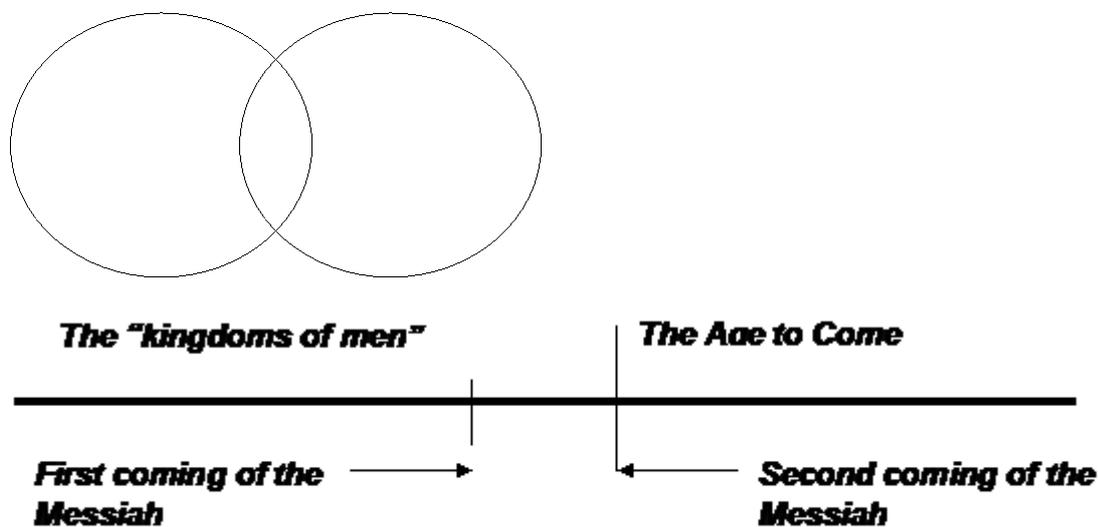
I believe that Jesus taught that there would be two major stages in the establishment of His kingdom:

1. During His ministry He taught that the Kingdom was "near" (Matthew 4:17), had "come upon you" (Matthew 12:28), and was "among you" (Luke 17:21). In the parable of the wheat and weeds He taught that the "sons of the Kingdom" will grow side by side with "the sons of the evil

one” until “the end of the age” when the angels will “weed *out of his kingdom* everything that causes sin and all who do evil” (Matthew 13:36-43). This is speaking about the period of time between His first and second comings when these two groups of people, described as wheat and weeds, grow together in “his kingdom”.

2. Yet there would be a time yet future when the Kingdom would be **fully** established. Hence, He taught His disciples to pray “Your Kingdom *come*” (Matthew 6:10). His parable of the sheep and goats points to a *future* time when the King will say “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (Matthew 25:34). Similarly, at the Last Supper Jesus said to His disciples “I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on *until* that day when I drink it anew with you in *my Father's kingdom*” (Matthew 26:29).

We can see from this that there is actually an *overlap* between these two major time periods.



The Kingdom of God has begun even before the age called the “kingdoms of men” has ended, but the greatest glories of the Kingdom of God will not be revealed until the kingdoms of men come to their full end. We are living in this “overlap period”. **Ethics of the Kingdom – how Kingdom-people should behave**

Jesus told more than 100 parables or sayings about the Kingdom. Most of these relate to our behaviour, our character, and how we are to live in the world where we find ourselves. Jesus’ main emphasis is on the *inner character* that underlies the *outward conduct*. For example, the Law condemned murder – Jesus condemned anger (Matthew 5:21-26). Conduct is an outward sign of character. “The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). “Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit” (Matthew 7:17).

Jesus also told several stories about how our lives now are preparing us for something to come. In the parable of the talents the master said to his good servants “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!” (Matthew 25:23). In the parable of the sheep and goats the

King says to those on his right: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." (Matthew 25:34-36).

The emphasis of these stories, and others like them, is that ***we are being prepared for a greater work in the future*** and our Master is giving us tasks to do today that will build the character and equip us for the work to be done in the future. The stories which end with some sort of picture of judgment (like these two) are not so much about being *rewarded* for work well done, as much as they are about entering in to the work for which we are now fully prepared.

This is why Jesus' teaching was primarily about *ethics* or *behaviour* because in them He is teaching us how to develop the *character* which is needed in Kingdom-people.

The Kingdom of God is a gift!

Jesus taught that the Kingdom would be a gift from God: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

"Grace" is one of the apostle Paul's favourite words. It literally means "a gift" [Gk. *charis*] and describes God's abundant generosity in giving us salvation. John says that "the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17) and "from the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another" (1:16). Luke said "all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words [or words of grace] that came from his lips" (Luke 4:22). We might be surprised then to discover that the Gospels record Jesus only ever using the word "grace" **twice** in His teachings! (and in both these places the translators have translated the Greek *charis* another way).

"If you love those who love you, what *credit* [Gk. *charis*] is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what *credit* is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what *credit* is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full." (Luke 6:32-34).

"Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he *thank* [Gk. *charis*] the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.' " (Luke 17:7-10).

When we look at the first of these teachings we see it is "sandwiched" between the well-known sayings "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (verse 31) and "love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back" (verse 35). **Jesus is teaching us something profoundly important here about grace.** These teachings are about doing good to others when there is no possibility that they can repay us – doing good to others without expecting to be rewarded for it. **This describes perfectly how we are to imitate God's grace.** We cannot earn salvation by good works. We cannot do anything for God which would ever repay what He has done for us. Salvation is God's gift. So we are to be imitators of God by

being *gracious* (or *grace-givers*) to others – behaving towards them in a way which imitates (on a small scale) the grace of God to us.

Much of Jesus' teaching is about God's abundant generosity to us – even though we are sinners and undeserving of His favour. The future Kingdom of God will bring peace, prosperity, and righteousness to an undeserving world. It will be **grace on a grand scale!** In preparing for this Kingdom God is now calling people to respond to His grace and to themselves become *gracious* or *grace-givers* – to become Kingdom-people.

No wonder then that so many of Jesus stories are about celebrating: wedding feasts, banquets, and celebrations are a common theme in His stories. God's free gifts of salvation and of a renewed earth are worth such celebration that even when one sinner repents and sets out on the Kingdom-path as a Kingdom-person that the whole of heaven celebrates! (Luke 15:10).

[1] God is, however, presented as king in a number of Old Testament passages, including: including Deut. 9:26 LXX; 1 Sam 12:12; Psalm 24:10; 29:10; Isaiah 6:5; 33:22; 43:15; Zeph. 3:15; and Zech 14:16-17. The OT also refers to His throne and Psalm 22:28 says “dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations”. Psalm 103:19 says “The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.” God's rule was rightly viewed as being “over all” and while the nation of Israel played an important part in His purpose, and God is called the King of Israel, Israel is never referred to as *the Kingdom of God*.

Jesus' teaching about grace

The last article in this series concluded with some comments about Jesus' teaching on *grace*. I noted that we might be surprised then to discover that the Gospels record Jesus only ever using the word "grace" **on two occasions**, even though it is a foundation teaching of the New Testament! I also noted that John says "the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17) and "from the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another" (1:16). Luke said "all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words [or words of grace] that came from his lips" (Luke 4:22).

From the two instances where Jesus spoke of *grace* in His teaching, we saw that **He was teaching us something profoundly important about grace**. His teachings were about doing good to others when there is no possibility that they can repay us – doing good to others without expecting to be rewarded for it. **Showing grace to others in this way is our response to the grace God has shown us**. We cannot earn salvation by good works. We cannot do anything for God which would ever repay what He has done for us. Salvation is God's gift. So we are to be imitators of God by being *gracious* (or *grace-givers*) to others – behaving towards them in a way which imitates (on a small scale) the grace of God to us.

I concluded by saying: "No wonder then that so many of Jesus stories are about celebrating: wedding feasts, banquets, and celebrations are a common theme in His stories. God's free gifts of salvation and of a renewed earth are worth such celebration that even when one sinner repents and sets out on the Kingdom-path as a Kingdom-person that the whole of heaven celebrates! (Luke 15:10)."

In this article I want to look at how Jesus taught about grace, even in stories and sayings where He did not even use the word! We will see from this why the doctrine of grace became so important to the church and why it features so prominently in Paul's writings.

Gifts and rewards

The parable of the *Workers in the Vineyard* (Matthew 20:1-16) tells of an employer who hires some workers early in the day, some later, and some an hour before quitting time, then pays each of them the same amount. When the workers who worked all day complain, the employer's explanation is: "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Matt. 20:15-16). God's standard of reward is totally different from human standards of payment – it is entirely a matter of grace. The labourer who puts in a full day received a *denarius*, which was a usual day's wages – this is what they deserved. But those who were sent into the field at the end of the day and worked only one hour received the same wages as those who had worked all day. By human standards a day's work deserves a day's pay. But by God's standards those who worked for one hour also received a day's pay. Human standards are based on merit and reward. God's standard is grace.

The well known parable of the *Lost Son* (Luke 15:11-32) has a similar message. A son demands the family fortune and wastes it, then returns home expecting little in the way of good treatment. The father welcomes him handsomely, over the objections of his other son who stayed at home and served dutifully. The older dutiful son got what he deserved. The younger son got what he didn't deserve. By human standards the older son should have been rewarded for his loyalty and service. But by God's standards the younger wayward son was accepted because his father loved him. This is grace.

We can see a common thread in these parables of Jesus: the grace of God is something that upsets human ideas about merit, about what is deserved, and what is due as a reward.

In fact, we see in some of Jesus' sayings and stories that the rewards are out of all proportion to the service which was rendered. Matthew records some examples of this:

- "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive **a hundred times as much** and will inherit eternal life." (Matthew 19:29)
- "' Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of **all his possessions.**" (Matthew 24:47)
- "' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of **many things.** Come and share your master's happiness!'" (Matthew 25:21,23)

This is the way it is with God.

- First, even our opportunities for service are a gift from God (Matt 25:14ff);
- then we are rewarded when we have only done our duty;
- finally we are rewarded out of all proportion to what we have done, even when we don't deserve to be rewarded at all.

Such is God's grace.

It is impossible to **earn** God's favour. The story of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14) makes the point that not even religious observances can make us deserving of God's rewards. In the story the tax collector, in a class of people despised and often associated with "sinners", is "justified before God" while the Pharisee who prayed, fasted and gave money to God's temple comes in for criticism. Yet elsewhere we are taught to pray, encouraged to give to the poor, and told that fasting is valuable. This parable focuses our attention on the **motivation** for religious observances. If we are being "religious" in order to **earn merit** with God then our efforts are useless. However, if our observances are the **grateful responses** of someone who has been saved as a result of God's undeserved favour, then they will not go unrewarded.

"Many are called but few are chosen"

In two places in Matthew's Gospel we read of Jesus saying "many are called but few are chosen" (Matthew 20:16; 22:14). These words appear to be contrary to the idea of God's overflowing generosity which we see repeatedly throughout Jesus' teachings. It appears that Jesus is saying that only a small number of people are actually chosen by God to enjoy His Kingdom and that even many of those who respond to His invitation will be rejected. This is so radically different from the rest of Jesus' teachings that we need to look at this saying carefully in its context.

In actual fact Jesus is only recorded as saying these words on one occasion. While the King James Version (KJV) also places them at Matthew 20:16, most translations do not include it here. It seems that the KJV is based on a manuscript which incorrectly included the saying here, as the best and most ancient manuscripts omit it.

So we need to look at the **one place** where Jesus used these words: at the end of the parable about the wedding feast (Matthew 22:14).

This is quite different to another parable about a wedding recorded in Luke 14:16-24 so we shouldn't confuse the two. A dominant theme in Matthew's Gospel is the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God because of Israel's rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. This is highlighted in the words "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (Matthew 21:43). It is this message which is being emphasized in this parable.

The parable is in two parts. In the first part (verses 1-10) the people who are **invited** to the wedding ignore the invitation so the invitation is extended to **anyone** the king's servants can find – good or bad – so the wedding hall is filled with guests. The message here is clearly a reference to Israel's rejection of their Messiah, and therefore His kingdom, and the invitation going to the Gentiles instead.

The second part of the story (vv. 11-14) has a very unexpected twist. The king notices one guest without an appropriate wedding garment, and has him bound and thrown outside. There are two unusual features of this twist.

- (1) It seems strange that someone who was invited at very short notice would be criticized for not dressing appropriately; and
- (2) the consequences seem overly harsh in the circumstances.

However, **this is no ordinary wedding: it is the King's son!** It would have been a great **honour** to have been invited and it seems that everyone else had time to dress appropriately. So the harsh treatment of the one person who didn't take the honour seriously may not have been overly harsh after all (although we must remember that Jesus often used **exaggeration** for emphasis).

The story ends then with the punchline: "For many are invited, but few are chosen" (verse 14). If *many* people were thrown out of the wedding hall and only a few allowed to remain then this saying would clearly refer to those who remained for the banquet. However, in the story *many* stay for the banquet and *only one* is rejected. If this saying referred to the fact that one person was "not chosen" because he wasn't properly dressed then it would have been more accurate to say "*many* are invited and *most* are chosen, but a *few* will be rejected". Obviously Jesus has something else in mind.

You may recall from previous articles that a parable usually has one main point, or two at the most. The closing line, the "punch line" (also called the "end-stress"), relates to this main point. In this story **the main point is that the people who were originally invited to the wedding banquet rejected this invitation and therefore others were invited in their place.** The final line takes us back to this point. Many people make the mistake of interpreting this line to mean "many are called (from the world), but few are chosen (from those who are called)". This interpretation has no connection to the context.

The "many" who are called, or invited, refers to the **second** group to be invited. The story makes it clear that a large number were included in this second invitation. "Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet **anyone you find!**" So the servants went out into the streets and gathered **all the people they could find**, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was **filled** with guests." On the other hand the first group appears to be relatively small: "**one** to

his field, **another** to his business". So the saying is better interpreted "many are called (from the world) but few are chosen (from the world)" and there is a contrast between being *called* and being *chosen* (there is possibly even a play on words in the Greek, where the word "called" or "invited" is *kletos* and the word *chosen* is *eklektos*).

The word "chosen" (Greek *eklektos*) has the meaning of being "picked out". It is a great honour to be "chosen" or "hand-picked". In this story the ones who were "hand-picked" to be at the wedding banquet were those who were initially invited. From all the people in his realm the king **chose** these people to celebrate with him on this special occasion. But they treated this honour with contempt, and so they too were rejected.

The person in the second part of the story had a similar attitude. Although he came to the wedding he did not take the honour seriously of being invited to such a special occasion. He was very casual in his attitude, and in this way was similar to those earlier who casually chose to carry on with their business rather than answer the king's summons.

We could paraphrase it this way: **"It is a great privilege to be invited, and many have been invited; but it is an even greater honour to be hand-picked, and only a few have that honour – so don't take it lightly."**

This story emphasizes the great **honour** which is offered to us when God invites us to the celebration in the kingdom of His Son. Israel suffered severely because they rejected that honour, and those who come into the church "casually" without considering what an enormous honour it is will also be treated severely. While we are saved by grace we must never take grace lightly. We have been given a wonderful privilege.

The Beginning of the Kingdom

In the last two articles in this series we began to look at what Jesus taught, and we saw that “the good news of the kingdom” was central to His message. We also considered His emphasis on *grace*: the Kingdom has been *given* to us – we don’t have to *work* for it.

In this article I want to look further at the *Kingdom-message* taught by Jesus, especially *how the kingdom begins*.

Matthew groups several parables together in a collection of stories beginning with the words “the kingdom of heaven is like ...”. [\[1\]](#)

1. Matthew 13:24

Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field ...” [The Parable of the Weeds]

2. Matthew 13:31

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field ...”

3. Matthew 13:33

He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

4. Matthew 13:44

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field ...”

5. Matthew 13:45

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls ...”

6. Matthew 13:47

“Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish ...”

We could add one more to this list.

7. Matthew 13:52

He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”

While this saying doesn’t *begin* in the same way (“the kingdom of heaven is like ...”) it includes the phrase in the *middle* of the sentence which follows on immediately from the others.

This collection begins with one of the most famous of all – the parable of the *sower* – and although it doesn’t begin in the same way, the story forms part of the same group and is similar to the others, so perhaps we are meant to think of it in the same way. After giving this parable Jesus was asked why He so often spoke in parables and He explained that through them He was able to explain “the secrets of the kingdom of heaven” (v. 11). I’ll return to this point shortly.

These parables or sayings are also *organised* in a particular way, with two pairs in the middle (C and C1), and we might recognise this as a *poetic* structure from earlier articles in this series.

| | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| A | 1. Parable of the Sower | How God <i>spreads the message</i> of the kingdom and how people <i>respond</i> to it. | Beside the sea, to the crowd(Each starting with “He told them another parable ... ”) |
| B | 2. Parable of the weeds. | How the enemy tries to disrupt the spread of the Gospel, and how kingdom-people co-exist with evil. | |
| C | 3. Parable of the Mustard seed | How the kingdom has <i>insignificant beginnings</i> . | |
| 4. Parable of the Yeast | | | |
| C1 | 5. Parable of the hidden treasure | How people <i>value</i> the good news of the kingdom. | Inside the house, to the disciples(Each starting with “Again He said ...”) |
| 6. Parable of the pearl. | | | |
| B1 | 7. Parable of the net | The two types of people “caught up” by the preaching of the kingdom. (Two types of fish). | |
| A1 | 8. Saying about the teacher | <i>Teaching the message</i> about the kingdom. | |

We find that Matthew divides these parables into two groups: those spoken beside the sea to the crowd; and those spoken later inside Peter’s house to the disciples. The second group were said after Jesus was asked by His disciples to explain the parable of the weeds. Even the way Matthew introduces the parables hints that he had this particular division or structure in mind. The parables addressed to the disciples link in to the earlier ones and give a further level of understanding, and by talking about the way people come in contact with the Gospel and how they are “caught up” by it, Jesus is also pointing out to His disciples *their role* in bringing people

to the Gospel. **None of Jesus' teachings are merely 'theoretical' – He always challenges a response from His listeners, and if people are to be drawn to the kingdom then the disciples are challenged to think about their role in bringing this about.** An interesting thing about these parables is that none of them speak specifically about the kingdom as our *reward* or of a kingdom in the way we might think of one: as a nation or country. In fact, they don't seem to be speaking about the kingdom at all, but describing how the kingdom is preached, how it begins, and the characteristics of the people who respond to the kingdom-message, the *citizens* of the kingdom – what I call *Kingdom-people*.

I noted earlier that the first parable in this collection in Matthew 13 includes a reference to “the *secrets* (or mysteries) of the kingdom of heaven” (v. 11). This expression also occurs in Luke 8:10^[i] and in Mark 4:11-12 where the singular “secret” is used rather than the plural form used in Matthew and Mark: He told them, ‘The *secret* of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”’ (quoting Isaiah 6:9). Mark’s wording suggests a single “secret” while the others suggest a secret which has *several aspects*. What is this secret, or mystery?

In Daniel we find the concept of God revealing His secrets to human beings. God grants the king a dream that was meaningless to him but whose meaning was revealed in a vision to God’s servant (Daniel 2:19). Paul understood “mysteries” to be **revealed secrets** (Romans 16:25-27^[ii]) – things which had been hidden for long ages but now revealed to God’s people. The secret is *proclaimed* to everyone, even though it is *understood* only by believers. **That the kingdom would come was no secret, but how it would come was not previously revealed.** This secret is revealed in this series of parables in Matthew 13.

The first parable (A) is about how God spreads the message of the kingdom, and how people respond to it. The good news of the kingdom must be willingly received – the kingdom is not forced upon people. The second parable (B) forms a pair with it as it describes how the enemy tries to disrupt God’s work. The kingdom has entered the world and produced “sons of the kingdom” who enjoy its power and blessings, but the world, or the present age, has not been overcome by this coming of the Kingdom. The righteous and the wicked mingle together in a mixed society – **the kingdom is present, but hidden** – until the end comes. The second *pair* (C) is about how the kingdom *begins* and describes first how the kingdom has small beginnings (“like a mustard seed”) but grows quickly, and secondly how it establishes its presence without us being aware of any visible change (“like yeast mixed with dough”). First, the kingdom is present in the world in a tiny, insignificant form. The Jews imagined the kingdom would be like a giant tree under which the nations would find shelter. They could not understand how Jesus’ tiny group of disciples could have any connection to this kingdom. Second, the kingdom has entered the world in a form that is hardly seen. Jesus is revealing how that just as when leaven is mixed with flour nothing appears to happen, yet eventually something does happen and the result is a complete transformation; so the kingdom is coming into the world in a form that appears to be small and insignificant yet we will at some time in the future see a complete transformation of the world as a result of these insignificant beginnings. The third pair (C1) is about how the kingdom is of greater value than we can reckon, and is to be sought above everything else. If it costs everything we have this is still a small price to pay compared with what it is worth. The Jews were expecting a Messiah who would raise an army and overthrow the Romans, not the leader of a small band of men who mixed with despised tax collectors and “sinners”. The “secret” that Jesus is revealing here is that the people might easily despise the

kingdom because of its coming in a way that could easily be overlooked or despised. Everyone should seek to enter the kingdom at any cost. Perhaps there is another secret being revealed here too: some people spend a lot of time searching for “the truth” and then find it in the good news of the kingdom, while others almost stumble across it. But both people, if they recognise it for what it is, will realise that it is a treasure beyond price. Notice from the ‘poetic’ structure of the parables that these two pairs (C and C1) are related: one pair (C) relates to the *insignificant beginnings* of the kingdom, while the next pair (C1) reveals that *despite these appearances* the kingdom is hardly insignificant – it is worth more than any treasure. The last ‘pair’ (B1 and A1) contains first a parable which describes two types of *fish* in a similar way to the second parable which described two types of *grain* or *crops* and how they are separated, but reveals another “secret”. While the parable of the wheat and tares reveals how the kingdom co-exists with evil in the world, the parable of the fish in the net reveals how both good and bad people exist together in the community of people who have been “caught up” by the good news of the kingdom. The Jews expected the Messiah to destroy all the godless nations and gather together a holy people. But Jesus came “not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17) and brought together a group of people who were rejected by society. Rather than destroying these “godless” people, Jesus called them into His kingdom. His invitation went out to all kinds of people, and the “net” caught up all sorts of people. Sorting out the good from the bad must await the last day, when the kingdom will become a perfect community. The final saying (A1) also refers to the *teaching* of the kingdom in much the same way as the first story (A) referred to how God *spreads the “seed”* of the good news of the kingdom. Again Jesus challenges His disciples to recognise their role in teaching the good news of the kingdom.

Conclusion

Jesus’ teachings must be interpreted against His situation: the Jewish world in which He lived and their expectations. The kingdom they were expecting was not the kingdom Jesus was bringing to them. As a result they could easily reject it, or despise it. They knew that the kingdom would come, but *how* it would come was a mystery to them, until Jesus revealed the secret through this series of parables. **The kingdom began with Jesus’ first coming, but all its glories would not be seen until a much later time.** Today people still reject the good news of the kingdom because they judge it on the basis of the people who are teaching about it, so Jesus’ message about being a small and insignificant group who are often despised and rejected by society is an encouragement to His people who are continuing His work of preaching the kingdom.

There is also a reminder here to us that we should not share the good news of the kingdom only with people who meet our expectations about what *kingdom-people* should be like. Jesus was rejected by the religious leaders of His day because he was mixing with the “wrong” type of people, contrary to their expectations of the Messiah. So we should share the good news with all who need it, not only those who we think will respond in the way we expect. We should leave it until “the last day” when God will sort the good from the bad. *Our role* is to share the good news, and leave the judging to God.

[1] The expression “kingdom of heaven” is used only by Matthew and means the same as “kingdom of God”. We know this by comparing Matthew’s record of several of Jesus’ sayings with the other Gospel writers who use the expression “k. of God” where Matthew writes “k. of heaven”. Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience who often avoided the word “God” in conversation and substituted it with expressions like “heaven”. The phrase “k. of heaven” does not imply the kingdom is **in** heaven, but is **of** or **from** God in heaven. No where does the Bible ever teach that our reward or destiny is in heaven.

[i] He said, “The knowledge of the *secrets* of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, “ ‘though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.’(Quoting Isaiah 6:9)

[ii] Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of *the mystery hidden* for long ages past, but *now revealed and made known* through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him – to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

The Meaning of the Kingdom (1)

In previous studies we've looked at the central message of Jesus' teachings – His “Good News of the Kingdom”.

In this chapter and the next we will wander a little from looking strictly at *Jesus' teachings* and look at how *His disciples* took up His message about the Kingdom.

The Bible frequently describes humanity as living in one or other of two realms.

John describes them this way:

In 1 John 3:14 he says “We know that we have passed

- from death
- to life”.

Elsewhere he speaks of:

- the children of the devil; and
- the children of God. (1 John 3:10)

He speaks of:

- those born of natural descent; and
- those born of God (John 1:13)

He speaks of those who:

- live and walk in darkness; and those who
- are in the light (1 John 2:7-11).

In speaking of those who have passed from death to life, he says this is the same as going

- from hate
- to love (1 John 3:14-15)

John quotes Jesus as saying

- you are from beneath;
- I am from above (John 8:23)

In the same verse Jesus says

- you are of this world;
- I am not of this world.

Paul speaks of these two realms in similar terms:

He writes about belonging to either

- sin; or

- righteousness (Rom 6:11-18)

He speaks of those who have

- the mind of the sinful nature; and those with
- the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:10-16)

He contrasts

- the kingdom of the air; with
- heavenly realms (Eph 2:1-7)

And

- the dominion of darkness; with
- the kingdom of light (Col 1:12-13)

In another contrast he writes of

- flesh; and
- spirit (Gal 5:16-26).

Throughout Scripture we see the two realms described in terms like these:

Daniel speaks of

- the kingdom of men; and
- the everlasting kingdom (Dan 4:17, 34).

Revelation speaks of

- the kingdom of the world; and
- the kingdom of our Lord and His Christ.

Both John and Paul speak of the kingdom **in the present tense** as though it had already begun:

“For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves” (Col 1:13)

W.E. Vine in his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* say the Greek word *basileia* translated kingdom “ is primarily an abstract noun, denoting sovereignty, royal power, dominion.” It is “where the King is and where his rule is acknowledged”.

Peter says “in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord” (1 Peter 3:15), so in establishing His kingdom Christ **first** rules in our hearts.

The New Testament has three words (in Greek) which describe the Christian attitude to the world:

- *xenos* – a foreigner or stranger. This word is used of the patriarchs in Hebrews 11:13. In the world the Christian is always a stranger; he is never really at home; he can never regard the present world as his permanent residence.

- *Parepidemos* – a pilgrim or traveller (also used of the patriarchs in Hebrews 11:13 as well as Christians in 1 Peter 2:11). The Christian is essentially a temporary resident in this world; he is looking beyond and is on his way there.
- *Paroikos* – a resident alien (used in Hebrews 11:9 and 1 Peter 2:11). This word describes the man who took up residence in one place without giving up citizenship of the place to which he truly belonged. The Christian is essentially a person whose only **real** citizenship is citizenship in the kingdom of God.

John speaks of the new life as “eternal life” He says: “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” (1 John 5:11-12). John bases this claim on Jesus’ teaching that “he who believes has everlasting life” (John 6:47).

The expression “eternal life” describes a **quality** of life as well as the **length** of life. It is the highest kind of spiritual and moral life, irrespective of its length. It is not only to be thought of as life prolonged to infinity, but as a sharing of living fellowship with the Father.

“Life” without Christ is not really life. Jesus said “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10:10).

Several of the verses I’ve just quoted speak of the Christian as moving from one realm to another – going from death, darkness and sin, into life, light and righteousness. When we are “in Christ” we continue to **exist** in the world of death, darkness and sin, but we no longer **belong** to it. We have changed our citizenship, although not our residence. We experience a higher quality of life and a new relationship with God.

The question we need to answer then is how do we move from one realm to the other? How do we become citizens of the kingdom and enjoy the benefits of the new life?

This was the question Jesus addressed when He told Nicodemus that “no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (John 3:3) and “no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (v. 5).

The transformation from one realm to another is so dramatic that Jesus describes it as a new life, being born again.

Paul takes up this idea in his letter to the church at Rome and describes how baptism in water is a symbol of dying and being raised to a new life.

“Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. ... count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:3, 4, 11)

Baptism has several meanings. Ananias told Paul to baptise and “wash your sins away” (Acts 22:16). Peter takes up this idea when he refers to the flood in Noah’s time and says “this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21). Paul used similar language when writing to Titus: “He saved us through the *washing* of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).

Putting these things together we see that when we are converted

- our past sins are taken away,
- our old way of life ends and we begin a new life, and
- we are reborn and renewed by the Holy Spirit.

Baptism in water is the **outward symbol** of these **inner realities**. It is an appropriate symbol of washing, burial and resurrection, and rebirth.

One of the last things Jesus said to His disciples before going to heaven was: “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). Matthew ends his Gospel with these important words. Mark ends his Gospel with something similar: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” (Mark 16:15-16).

Soon after, in the Acts of the Apostles, we read of the apostles baptizing thousands of people and saying “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38).

We read of many incidents like this one: “when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.” (Acts 8:12)

And this one: “Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?” Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may”. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.” (Acts 8:36-38).

Baptism in water was the normal way by which people became Christians in the New Testament. It was the *sign* that they had commenced a new life.

Throughout the New Testament it is clear that our “rebirth” is **the work of God** – we do not recreate ourselves into new people.

- Peter says “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” (1 Peter 1:23). **Peter is speaking of a life conceived by God Himself!**
- Earlier Peter wrote: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy **he has given us new birth** into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade” (1 Peter 1:3-4).
- Several times in his first letter John speaks of those who have been “born of God” and he says in one place “God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God” (1 John 3:9).
- James says “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. **He chose to give us**

birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.” (James 1:17-18).

These ideas are based directly on the Lord’s own words: “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” (John 3:6). Our rebirth then is the work of God. He enables and empowers us to live the new life.

The meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus was a confrontation of two philosophies - two opposing views on salvation. Nicodemus thought a person made themselves acceptable to God through observing commandments and rules; Jesus said salvation is entirely the work of God.

Nicodemus questioned this. “How can this be?” (John 3:9). He was asking why would God do this? What would motivate Him to offer such a gift? Jesus’ answer reveals that this was the reasoning behind Nicodemus’ question, because He says: "God so **loved** the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life" (v. 16). The motive, the reason for God taking the initiative in salvation, is **love**.

The choice now is ours to accept this gift from God of a new life. The two realms are set before us and we need to make the decision to accept God’s offer. God set a similar choice before Israel when they escaped slavery in Egypt. He said: “See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction ... This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now **choose life**, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19-20).

Notice how God sets the two choices before them. On the one hand there is death, destruction and curses; on the other hand is life, prosperity and blessings. The choice was theirs, and God said “choose life!” It seems strange that given such a clear distinction between life and death, destruction and prosperity, blessings and curses, that God should have to say “choose life!” Yet we are faced with the same choice: the dominion of darkness or the kingdom of light; to be slaves to sin, or to be set free by the Spirit; to have the mind of the flesh, or the mind of Christ. So many people make the wrong choice – but with the right choice comes the assurance of salvation: “He who believes and is baptised **will be saved**” (Mark 16:16).