Exploring the More Complex 3-Point Parables

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Part 1: More Complex Three-Point Parables

We now turn to parables of Jesus, which still to some degree have, I believe, a three-pronged or triangular structure. But I refer to them as more complex three-point parables for reasons that we will see as we go along. They don't just follow the simple model of a master with contrasting subordinates, and they don't follow even the slightly less simple model of multiple subordinates that can all be grouped together. Like the parable of the ten bridesmaids, where we saw five wicked bridesmaids and five wise bridesmaids. In this segment, I want for us to look at two pairs of parables that are similar enough to each other in each case that some commentators have envisioned them as very different versions of the same original. Because in both cases, the pairs are narrated in different gospels in completely different contexts.

I am more inclined to think that Jesus simply used one basic plot and varied it noticeably to fit two different contexts. The first of those pairs is the parable that in Matthew is usually called the parable of the talents or, in the updated NIV, the parable of the bags of gold. And in its counterpart in Luke, the parable of the pounds is the traditional title, going back to the King James Version English currency. But the parable of the minas—to use the ancient word for the currency that's used—is another name for it. In Matthew 25, we have the most straightforward plot. We have the story of a man who is going on a journey and entrusts his wealth to his servants to invest and make more money if possible. To one, he gives five talents (units of currency) or ingots of gold; to another, two; and to a third, one. He leaves. The first two servants put his money to work. The one with five makes five more; the one with two makes two more. But we read,

> *"The man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole on the ground and hid his master's money."*

Sounds odd to us, but in a world without security systems like we have, to bury money in an unmarked place known only to yourself, perhaps even under a room in your own home was a very common and a very secure way of safeguarding prized property.

Then we read in Matthew 25:19,

> *"After a long time, the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The first two are praised . . ."*

And the language is very similar,

> *"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."*

Though they were given different amounts and though they both doubled what they made, the distinction doesn't seem to be significant. This is like one of those stories: There were three people—a priest, a pastor, and a rabbi. The first two are comparatively insignificant compared to the third. There may be some variety between them but the point is building toward the climax.

It's the third servant that the attention focuses on. And this man in verse 24 says,

> *"Master, . . . I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed."*

I don't think we're supposed to assume that that's necessarily true. This is obviously going to be the disobedient servant, so he may be making excuses for himself.

> *"So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you."*

And I don't think the master's reply is a recognition that he is a wicked master. He simply takes the servant's words at face value as if to say,

> *"So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed."*

Well, if that were true—he's not saying it is or it isn't—that's all the more reason that you should have tried to make some money, and

> *"put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that at least I would have received it back with interest."*

That would have been a more cautious but still profitable approach than the investment that produced a 100 percent yield.

> *"So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. For whoever has will be given more,"*

in the sense of those who have, after they have worked with the master's money, they will be given even more; and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, because they refuse to do what was commanded and make more money, even what they have—this one talent that the man safeguarded—will be taken from them.

> *"Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

This is only a slight variation from the simple, three-point parable model. It has a master figure. It has two good subordinates who are not identical. Perhaps the reason for two is to remind Jesus' disciples that not everybody has the same natural abilities or spiritual gifting. Some seemingly have more. The task is for us to be faithful with whatever we've been given.

But then there's the contrast with the man who refuses to obey and refuses what is admittedly a risk. The Christian life is at times risky. We don't have absolute guarantees in this life that Christianity is true or that following Christ will yield the eternal life that we believe by faith will be ours one day. But we have enough reason to believe it, that we are called to take that step of faith. Then we flip over to Luke 19, and we see a parable that is very similar but with a couple of added episodes.

Luke 19:11—different context, different audience, public setting; people thinking, because now that He is coming to Jerusalem for His climactic journey that finally He's going to take up the mantle of the one who will lead the land of the Romans. The kingdom of God was going to appear at once. And He tells a story of a man of noble birth who went to a distant country to have himself

appointed king and then to return. So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. “

Put this money to work until I come back.”

And most of the story follows the plot. In this case, people are given the same amount but make different amounts because that also happens when people put their spiritual talents or gifts to use.

But again, the climax comes with the third servant who makes no attempt to make any money with what his master has given him. But inserted into this story is what seems to be a second complicated or complicating plot where there is an embassy of the citizens of that nobleman who oppose him, who try to have him removed from his kingdom unsuccessfully. And so at the end, as well as the accounting of the servants, there is also the comment,

“But these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and kill them in front of me.”

A diagram of this passage could look just like the diagram of the parable of the talents, but it seems that here the focus is much more on the bad example and that it should be subdivided into two different ways. That one can turn out to be a wicked servant—one can do so more subtly through neglect, through inaction, like the servant who simply does nothing with the mina he’s received; or one can do it overtly through the kind of opposition the nobleman received. But either way, one is judged as outside the kingdom.

A similar pair of passages also in Matthew and Luke this time finds Luke with the simplest version. In Luke 14, the parable of the great banquet, beginning in verse 15 as Jesus is correcting the ideas of someone who has said,

“Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God,”

probably thinking of the standard Israelite’ hope for Jews as the main people present. He tells a story about a man who has given an invitation to many guests for a banquet, much like our save-the-date invitations today. And then when the time has come, he sends his servants to summon them, but they all alike began to make excuses.

The man is upset, but his purposes are not thwarted as he sends the servants out to find the ragtag people of the town: the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame; and then to go out again and into the countryside to find even more so that his banqueting table is full. But he promises that none of those originally invited who refused will get a taste of the banquet—another reminder that all excuses for rejecting God's kingdom overtures ultimately lead to judgment. But God's purposes will not be thwarted as He will find replacement guests. And from the point of view of the master, that God sends out His invitations to the kingdom widely in all parts of the world, there's even a hint that the excuses are particularly lame, because one says,

> *"I've just bought five yoke of oxen" (verse 19). "I'm on my way to try them out."*

It'd be like buying a used car, sight unseen, and then seeing if it worked; or another one who says, *"I've just bought a field, and I must go and see it."* It'd be like buying land in Florida without confirming whether it even existed. And someone has married a wife, and you say, *"Well, that sounds like a good excuse,"* except that they saved the date and now they're substituting a royal invitation for a grand banquet. They're substituting getting married. It's a deliberate flaunt and snub to the king.

But compare that story with the passage in Matthew 22 often called the wedding feast. Same basic plot. This time it's explicitly a king giving a wedding feast for his son. This time the cost of refusing the invitation is even harsher. The servants are sent to go and burn the city that those people came from. Hard not to think of an allusion to AD 70 when Rome comes and destroys Jerusalem. But the complicating feature here is the little subplot after the replacement guests have been identified in verse 11. When the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked him,

> *"How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?"*

The man was speechless. You say *"Well, how could a poor person pulled off the street be expected to have the right dress?"* And the answer is it was provided for him if he didn't have it himself. So this appears to be a deliberate spurning of the terms of the king and how you come into the presence of the king and his festivities. So again, the parable ends in judgment.

Just as the parable of the pounds talked about two ways to be a wicked servant, here we see two ways to not end up in the wedding hall. One is the more overt rejection, the other is simply to try to come, but not on the king's terms, not the way God would have you come. And then Jesus concludes,

> *"For many are invited, but few are chosen."*

Who are those chosen? The ones who come, but come on God's terms.

Part 2: Two More Complex Three-Point Parables

In this video segment, we want to look at two more complex three-point parables. The parable of the sower and the parable of the workers in the vineyard. The parable of the sower appears in all three Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The passage I'll be reading from—and there are not a lot of differences among the parallels—is Mark 4. Jesus is teaching by the Sea of Galilee and says,

> *"Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."*

Then Jesus said,

> *"Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."*

This is one of the best known of Jesus' parables, perhaps among the top three or four in familiarity. At first glance, it seems obvious that this does not have a triangular structure. There are five prongs to it. If you wanted to draw a flow chart, you'd put the sower or the farmer at the top and then you would put the four different kinds of soil at the bottom and perhaps draw connecting lines in each case. The seed that fell along the path, the seed that fell in rocky soil, the seed that fell among thorns, and then finally the seed that fell in good soil. But again, we have to remember the

dynamics of storytelling, just like telling a good joke.

Sometimes there are simple contrasts. There were two people, one who did something good and the other bad or vice versa. Sometimes there's a setup by having two characters, perhaps not identical but similar enough that they're a foil for the third and climactic one. In this case, we have three elements. Three seeds that all fall on inadequate kinds of soil. Each one appears to be closer to the real thing and, indeed, throughout the history of interpretation, there are people who have tried to make the seeds in the second and third soils correspond to true disciples of Jesus, but the dynamics of storytelling will not allow that.

What's happening here is an example of seed that goes absolutely nowhere. It doesn't even take root in the soil. The birds come eat it up, and it's gone. Then you have some that's planted that does produce a stem, perhaps some leaves, but it does not mature in order to produce the crop. The third one gets even closer but does not produce the crop. It's too easy to read this story and think, *"But all but the first seed does yield some kind of plant."* No farmer cares a wit about whether stems, leaves, flowers appear on something that's supposed to produce fruit or grain. The true disciple—where the activity that God has been superintending in a life of someone actually bears genuine fruit—is what the farmer is looking for.

Someone says, *"Well, you haven't read Jesus' explanation of the parable."* It's true. That was deliberate. In verse 13, after He's been asked to explain the parable, He says,

> *"Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy."*

That doesn't necessarily mean they're true Christians. There've been a lot of people in the history of the world whose initial reaction to the gospel message has been a very positive, very celebratory one, but they have no root—to change the metaphor to one Jesus uses in John 15. They're not branches connected to the vine. They last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

John will say in 1 John 2:19,

> *"They went out from us, because they were not of us. If they were of us, they would have remained with us."*

Mark 4:18:

> *"Still others,"*

the third seed and the third soil,

> *"like seed sown among thorns, hear the word"*

—hearing the word is not the same as genuinely accepting it and bearing fruit—

> *"but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things."*

How many in our modern Western societies impacted by what has been called "affluenza," the desire for affluence, may fall into this category? Maybe they go to church, maybe they are involved in Christian things, but their real commitment is to their possessions, their wealth, their jobs, their leisure time activities. They're not sold out for Jesus. They make it unfruitful.

The only genuine disciples here are those who hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop. And that crop may be an ordinary crop, thirty-fold in Jesus' day. It may be a wonderful crop, sixty-fold in Jesus' time. It may be supernaturally extraordinary, a hundred-fold. There's no particular level that's required. There is something to be shown. There is a transformed life of some kind. The passage does boil down to a sower, three kinds of inadequate seed in inadequate soils, and one kind of seed that produces a variety of crops. But it does produce the fruit for which it is sown. Be sure that you are like that third kind of seed.

A second parable that at first glance has even more subordinates—you'd be drawing lines all over the place top-down—is Matthew 20, the workers in the vineyard. As often was the case in an agrarian economy, near the end of the harvest season if the harvest wasn't coming in, if the signs of the weather and the time of the growing season showed that the rainy days were soon to be upon people, it would become an all-out blitz to get as much of the crop in as possible so that it wasn't destroyed. And so the kingdom of

heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them the standard day's wage, a denarius, and sent them to his vineyard.

At the third hour, nine o'clock in the morning, he realizes he needs more workers. The work is still not going fast enough. People hung out in the town square—people who didn't have full-time work, especially at harvest time, especially for this very reason—in case even for a portion of a day they could gain some work. And he tells some of these people:

"You also go and work in my vineyard."

He doesn't say how much he will give them. He just says,

"I will pay you whatever is right."

And they probably envisioned three-quarters of a denarius. At noon he goes again and at three in the afternoon and at five in the afternoon. So now we're up to five prongs.

It's a bumper crop. Either that or the laborers are particularly slow or the landowner has really underestimated the need—that's not relevant to the passage. The point is that when dusk falls about the twelfth hour (about 6:00 p.m.), and it's time to pay the workers, the foreman is told to begin with the last hired—the ones who had worked only one out of twelve hours of the day who were undoubtedly expecting just a twelfth of a denarius—and surprise, surprise, surprise. The workers who are hired (Matthew 20:9) at about five in the afternoon, the eleventh hour (counting from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.) came and each received a denarius—twelve times as much as they undoubtedly imagined. They would have been overjoyed. They probably would have said something out loud. Others waiting in line would have found out. What happens next? The ones hired at the third hour expecting a quarter of a denarius, come and get a whole day's wage. Undoubtedly they were thrilled as well.

And then the ones hired at noon expecting a half a day's wage get a full day's wage. And how would they have responded? Well, delighted to get more than they expected. But isn't it interesting? Even a half a day's work—if the sun was hot, if the need was great, if the foreman was on their backs to keep at it—was hard work. Didn't they deserve a little more than those people hired at the fifth hour or hired at 5:00 p.m. and those hired at nine in

the morning expecting three quarters of a denarius? Yes, they got more than they expected, but still no more than those hired for working only one hour. And finally the ones hired and working all day get the same. Had the people been paid in the reverse order and gone away, no one would ever have known a thing. Had the people never shared what they got with each other, there would have been no jealousy. But that's human nature. Even when we receive what is absolutely fair, we begrudge those to whom God shows His grace inappropriately. That's our culture of entitlement. *"These who were hired last worked only one hour,"* says the first group, *"and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day."*

And here come the three points in rapid succession. The man answered one of them and said, *"I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go."* God is never less than fair. But he continues, *"I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you"* and all of those hired later. *"Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"* Often God is gracious and generous, and we should be glad for that because He is in our lives so often as well. It would be a miserable existence if He was only fair.

And then, finally, verse 16, *"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."* And you say, *"Wait a minute. Aren't they all equal in this story?"* Yes they are. The last gets the same as the first, and the first gets the same as the last. And all those in between get the same. Ultimately God's people are all equal in His sight. However we package and interpret and teach and preach this story, we must make sure that we hang onto God's absolute justice, but don't stop there. Add His marvelous grace and the fundamental equality of all true believers.

Part 3: One Final Three-Point Parable

There's one last parable of Jesus that fits, up to a point, our three-point triangular model; and that is the parable often known as the wicked tenants. It, along with the parable of the sower, is the only other parable to appear in all three Synoptic Gospels. No, I take that back. It's the only other long parable to appear in all three. The little parable of the mustard seed does also. But we'll be following Mark 12 and the first twelve verses. It is certainly more complex in terms of its plot.

Jesus tells a story of a man who planted a vineyard. Lots of detail. We wonder why we're being told all of this:

> *He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the wine press and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them. They struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another and that one they killed. He sent many others. Some of them they beat; others they killed. He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, "They will respect my son." But the tenants said to one another, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this passage of Scripture, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes." Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.*

After a brief introduction that is setting the stage for a harvest, the body of this story describes the results of the harvest and the refusal of the tenant farmers to give the produce to their landlord. A whole series of servants are sent. But they are mistreated until climactically a beloved son is sent, but climactically also he is killed and thrown out of the vineyard. Much like we saw in the parables of the great banquet and wedding feast. There are replacements for the evil individuals here: new tenant farmers replace the original servants. And Jesus uses His own rhetorical question and answer at the end of the passage to bridge to a text out of Psalm 118:22–23 about a stone rejected by some that becomes a cornerstone for others.

Intriguingly, especially after the number of times when it appears, Jesus' disciples don't gather what He's talking about, or at least not fully. His immediate audience here—the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders, the Jewish authorities most in charge of the temple proceedings in Jerusalem— understood that He had spoken the parable against them. Christians throughout the centuries have pretty unanimously intuited that

in the context of Jesus teaching in the temple precincts the last week of His life, that the vineyard owner, like the master figure in virtually all of His parables, in some way represents God; and that the original tenant farmers who are disobedient must reflect the current leadership within Israel—hence the anger on the part of the Jewish authorities at the end of the story— that the replacements are Jesus' followers. In Matthew's version, very similar to Mark's, there is an entire verse addition in Matthew 21:43 where he specifically has Jesus say that the kingdom will be taken and given to an ethnos of people, a nation who will produce the fruit of it. Seemingly a reference to the church of Jesus Christ of all people groups.

Is this an allegory? If simple three-point parables are at least miniature allegories—not necessarily with the detail that we find in the parable of the sower or the wheat and the weeds—then surely that applies here as well. But should we press the symbolism any further? Should we consider the son to be Jesus? It's almost impossible after the fact, after Jesus' crucifixion—He was crucified outside the city walls—to read verse 8 and not see in here an image of Jesus. It may be then that this is a slightly more elaborate parable with as many as four prongs. But we can still diagram it with basically a triangle because the son and, for that matter, the servants, is perhaps a reference to the prophets before Jesus, perhaps including John the Baptist who was beheaded. And the word that's used in Mark 12:4 for striking someone on the head can in some context also mean to behead. That series of messengers, culminating in the Son that God sends, all represent that top vertex of our triangle—God and messengers from him—with the new tenant farmers and the original disobedient ones representing the good and bad subordinates at the bottom.

If this is a unique four-pronged parable, then our message can be summarized in some way as God delegating service for Him initially to Israel: Israel's leaders in the first century, in the time of Jesus reaching a point of climactic disobedience so that God's reign or rule is now embodied in Jesus' followers of all ethnic groups; and then perhaps an additional point foreshadowing the crucifixion: that Jesus said something like this and it should be seen as true to the original part of the story, maybe supported by the fact that there is no point-by-point allegorical explanation at the end. In fact, there are ways to make sense of this story as a very realistic account of life in first-century Israel.

In a world where possession was sometimes not nine-tenths of

the law of ownership, as we say, but ten- tenths, the logic makes sense. But after the fact of Jesus' crucifixion, it's hard not to suspect that there might be an additional point here. That brings us to the end of our so-called triangular passages, but not to the end of parables that I believe have three points.

As we mentioned back in our first week of videos, there is one parable, the story of the good Samaritan, a very famous story found in Luke 10, that seems to represent a horizontal structure, not a position of anyone being in power who judges between good and bad subordinates but the man seriously injured, left for dead, who nevertheless is the unifying figure of the story and able to judge between who is the good and bad subordinates.

And as we've seen so often with a surprising twist—where the priest and Levite, the clergy of the day who would have been expected to be the helpers, do not stop and offer help and the hated outsider or the Samaritan does stop—here there is a very short statement by Jesus at the conclusion of the parable that I think, as a result of its presence, has misled some readers into thinking the parable is just a little more simple than it really is.

The context is about a lawyer, an expert in the law, who is trying to trap Jesus. He is not seeking genuine spiritual information. He's asking, "

What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

He's probably heard that Jesus seems to come in conflict on many occasions with the Jewish laws. Jesus, undoubtedly knowing this, turns directly to that topic and asks him in verse 26,

"What is written in the law?"

The man responds with the double love command. Jesus says *"right."* He's avoiding any trap.

The man is not satisfied. He wants to justify himself. Part of the double love command is *"love your neighbor as yourself"* as well as God. And so he says, *"Who is my neighbor?"* There's something about the story that's meant to answer the question, Who is my neighbor? But when Jesus finishes the story, He simply throws the question back to the lawyer; and He phrases it in the reverse fashion by saying,

"Which of these three [the priest, Levite, and Samaritan] do you think was a neighbor to the man?"

He has no choice but to answer, *"The one who had mercy on him."* But he may not even be able to bring himself to use the word Samaritan. Jesus then tells him, *"Go and do likewise."* Yes, if the focus is on the Samaritan, the lesson from this story is to imitate his surprising mercy, especially when people are in a life-and-death situation and may not have any other way of getting help.

But that story does not require a priest and a Levite as a foil as the bad example. There must be a second prong that says something about not allowing religious duty or position or status to get in the way, as it often can, of true obedience and love. Yet even that point could have been made with a story about a priest, a Levite, and an ordinary Israelite. And in fact the rabbis who told many parables had multiple stories that fit that pattern. Now here, the real shock, the biggest surprise in the passage is that the Samaritan is the hero—the one who is viewed as an enemy. And so unless we add, thirdly, the lesson that the man who is injured learns that even my enemy is my neighbor, we may have missed the most central and the most convicting point.

Part 4: Top-Down, Three-Pronged Parables

We come in this video segment to the last two of the three-part parables of Jesus. We've looked at a barrage of those that seem to reflect a kind of triangular structure. We looked at one at the end of our last segment that had a horizontal line graph for those who are helped by those diagrams. We come now to two whose, shall we say, corporate flow charts are vertical lines from top down: a master figure, a subordinate, and not a contrasting subordinate or the master figure but someone who is under that single subordinate. The first of these two parables comes in Matthew 18:23–35. Jesus is teaching on forgiveness, but He has also just given the famous passage dealing with sin in the church, sometimes called church discipline, in verses 15–20. And following it may be the Christian's responsibility to forgive almost without limit as seems to be the point of the little exchange with Peter in verses 21–22, if by forgiveness we mean what I can do by myself irrespectively of someone else's response: I can choose not to get stuck psychologically, not to harbor a grudge, not to plot revenge, not to play the victim card, not to spend the rest of my life rehearsing the way I've been wounded. But sometimes we use the term forgiveness almost as a synonym for reconciliation.

And that requires the other person, the offender as well as the offended, to respond properly. Tragically in Jesus' world as in ours, that doesn't always happen, and therefore in the Christian context, there may at times need to be church discipline. But at the end of this chapter, trying to balance these themes, Jesus tells a very challenging story.

On the one hand, it seems to embody almost unlimited forgiveness. On the other hand, it equally seems to embody a very harsh judgmental response. How can we keep these two together? The parable falls into three scenes or episodes. The first one is: if we were staging it, we might imagine the palace or throne room of the king.

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

This is an extraordinary debt. The text literally speaks of ten thousand talents. This was the largest numeral in the Greek language, 10,000. This was the largest currency in the Roman Empire, a bar of gold. Bibles with footnotes or Study Bibles may say something like the updated NIV: *"a talent was worth about 20 years of a day laborer's wages."* Multiply that by 10,000, and you get the idea of how exorbitant a sum this was. If there's anything unrealistic about this passage, it's that somebody could even accumulate so massive a debt. And certainly what's unrealistic is what happens next. The servant fell on his knees before him, *"Be patient with me,"* he begged, *"and I will pay back everything."* And we might say, today, *"Yeah, you and what army?"*

We read, however, that *"the servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go."* If you're trying to depict lavish forgiveness, amazing grace, extraordinary generosity and mercy, this is the epitome of that picture. And that's the first prong of the story. That's the basic character of this king, who by now we expect is in some way going to resemble God. But then comes the second scene. When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins or a hundred dinar, a day's wage. So here, allowing for the Sabbath and one or two other holy days, we're talking about three months' wages at minimum wage. Not a paltry sum by any means for a day labor,

but compared to . . . maybe we should call the other debt zillions of dollars. So we don't worry about how many zeros to put on it. It really is paltry.

But the first servant reacts diametrically opposite to the experience he's just had. He grabbed him, began to choke him, and said, *"Pay back what you owe me!"* The fellow servant falls to his knees, begins to sound exactly like the first servant had, *"Be patient with me, and I will pay it back."* But the response is exactly the opposite. He refused. He went off, had the man thrown into prison till he could pay the debt. And in the world where people couldn't own or earn money in prison, it probably means he'll die there.

How absurd for someone forgiven so much to turn around and react that way is surely the second prong of this passage, the lesson that the introduction of the second servant into the story creates. But now we're back with a reprise. We're back with the original stage props. We're back to the first scene and the third scene. The servants tell the king what has happened, and that first servant is called in and lambasted (verses 32–33),

> *"'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'"*

And the end result is that he's the one thrown into jail, even to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed, which is never going to happen. And now the sting in the tail,

> *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

Theologians like to debate at this point whether this is forgiveness retracted; whether this means a true Christian can forfeit salvation; or whether by the man's actions—by his completely calloused heart immediately in the aftermath of receiving such extraordinary grace—shows thereby that he can't have genuinely appropriated that grace. I fall into that second category, but I don't think we should be distracted by that debate here. The best summary of this parable I've ever heard comes from Dr. Jerry Nelson who summed it up with a three-word sentence,

> "Forgiven people forgive."

If you've truly grasped the enormity of your sin and the extravagance of God's grace, there is nothing anyone in this life can do to you, however evil, that can't and shouldn't be forgiven in comparison with the forgiveness we've already received.

The other top-down, three-pronged parable appears, I believe, in Luke 16, traditionally called the unjust steward. NIV subheadings call it the shrewd manager. It's a very puzzling passage, because it seems like God is commending injustice, but I think that interpretation is wrong. Luke 16:

> *"Once there was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions,"*

and presumably that accusation is true.

> *"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.'"*

Some of us are old enough to remember when the common pattern in this country was that people were given two weeks' notice if they were going to be fired. That seems to be increasingly rare these days, but something like that is what we should envisage in this parable.

The man has been given notice, but there is a short period of time in which he can continue to act legally on behalf of his master. And with the fear of God put in him, the assumption is he will behave appropriately. But the manager asks himself, *"What shall I do now? . . . I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg."* And then he comes up with a very clever or shrewd but not entirely ethical ruse.

At this point, commentators love to speculate about historical background that should be read into the passage. There is some evidence in the ancient Mediterranean world that at times an estate manager in a situation like this could charge the master's debtors more interest than the master demanded back in payment for loans. And much like the tax collector that we talked about earlier made his income from that excess, skimming his profits off the top, as it were. Maybe that's what's going on here, but we're not told that in so many words.

It could be that this is as unethical a practice as whatever he

originally did that led to the charge of wasting his master's possessions. The point is not the ethics of it. The point is that it is extraordinarily clever or shrewd. He reduces the debtor's bills. They become ingratiated to the master, assuming that the master has authorized this. One could even imagine them coming back and thanking the master profusely. And what's the master going to do at that point? Say, "I'm sorry, I never authorized that." And so in verse 8 we read the master commended the dishonest manager—not for his dishonesty, don't stop before you finish the sentence. He commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly, cleverly, wisely, or prudently. But the word suggests a kind of edginess, something that's pushing the boundaries. That's one of the prongs. We should appreciate the master's commendation.

But Jesus continues as a kind of ironic aside,

> *"For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind [other unbelievers] than are the people of light [Jesus' followers]."*

Isn't it sadly often the case that people who think all there is to live is this life will put a lot more effort and care into trying to make sure that things go well for them then the Christian will in taking care and exhibiting shrewdness and careful wise thought about their futures.

That's what we should learn from the steward's behavior; and then finally from the debtor's (verse 9): *"I tell you,"* Jesus concludes, *"use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves,"* like the debtors in the parable, *"so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."* Paraphrase that: use your material possessions for kingdom purposes, to make and nurture disciples and do God's work on the earth so that when you die, you'll be welcomed by those who preceded you into God's presence because of how you used your wealth and possessions to God's end and for His glory.