

Exploring Two- and One-Point Parables



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Part 1: Two-Point Parables with the Horizontal Line Model

At long last we have exhausted, I think, the major narrative parables of Jesus that can fairly be divided into three main characters or elements and then diagrammed as either a triangle with three points or a straight line, either horizontally or vertically but still with three points. But we haven't exhausted all of Jesus' parables. As we suggested early on in week one, while perhaps about two-thirds of Jesus' teachings fall into the three-point pattern, of the remaining one-third, half of them, which would be about a sixth—if I remember how to multiply fractions right—have two main characters or details and either exhibit a contrast between a good example and a bad example without an explicit master or even unifying figure of any kind who interacts with the two of them or it is a top-down master and single servant kind of diagram without a contrasting subordinate to form a foil.

If our approach is at all valid in these classes, we would expect that the two-pronged parables would teach two lessons, one related in some way to each of the two main characters. Let's see if that hypothesis proves to be helpful. I think there are only two of the two-point parables that have the horizontal line model. There are more with the vertical line model. One of those two is a parable we've talked briefly about before, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, and it's found in Luke 18:9–14.

Luke gives us a tiny bit of a clue as to the context when he says,

“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: “God, I thank you that I’m not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. [He apparently sees him out of the corner of his eye.] I fast twice a week and give a

tenth of all I get.” [One wonders how much else he might’ve said in self-congratulation.] But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.””

Now let’s hit the pause button. What would the cultural expectations have been? And of course I am reading the parable interpretively imagining the way Jesus and two fictitious characters might have spoken. We don’t know for sure how Jesus Himself inflected the words as He told this story. But we need to realize that whereas in today’s world you can Google Pharisee and the first three online dictionaries you find will give as either their first or second definitions “*a hypocrite*,” the Pharisees in Jesus’ world of all the leadership groups were the most beloved because they were laypeople. They were not the ordained rabbis. They were not the people in charge of the temple. They were not the wealthy priests whose wealth made them so susceptible to corruption. They were not the Sadducees who made a living based on the temple cult and its aristocracy. They had, in their best moments, the very goal that every modern-day Bible-believing Christian should have and certainly that our pastors and leaders should have: to apply the Scriptures to every aspect of daily life.

Can that degenerate into legalism? Of course it can, but it doesn’t have to. And so when a Pharisee and a tax collector are the two characters in a story of Jesus, and they’re named right up front and everything that we said in previous video segments about tax collectors comes to people’s mind—Jewish traitors who sold out to the Roman government, working for the hated occupying enemy forces, coming annually to collect exorbitant taxes from Jewish people at sword point, if necessary, with the Roman guard with them—then there’s no question people are going to relate to the Pharisee and identify with him and assume that he will be the hero.

Well, maybe the way I read the statement of the Pharisee prejudiced us against him. Maybe I should have done it in a very normal and seemingly pious tone of voice.

“God, I’m so grateful for your grace in my life. I can’t take any credit for it. You have put me in a wonderful place with wonderful parents, schooling, and opportunities to live an upstanding and godly life. I’m so glad I’m not like the prostitutes and the pimps and the human traffickers of our world. You know that I give a regular tithe following the

Old Testament law and go beyond the law that commands fasting only on the day of atonement, and I fast twice a week.” If I say it in that tone of voice with some interpretive additions, you might be very empathetic towards me. But verse 14 where we pushed the pause button, if we start up the tape again says, “I tell you that this man [the last one that Jesus has mentioned, the tax collector], rather than the other [the Pharisee], went home justified before God.”

You’re joking, the crowds may have thought or even spoken. The tax collector hasn’t even offered a sacrifice. He’s just begged for God’s mercy. Although, interestingly, the verb translated “have mercy” is the same verb from which we get the word propitiation, which is an atoning sacrifice. Maybe he was offering an animal sacrifice, but the point is he is simply casting himself on the mercy of God. And even if the Pharisee was speaking in the way I inflected things the second time through, Luke tells us this is directed toward those who were confident of their own righteousness.

Dr. Bruce Demarest, one of our senior professors, a long-time professor of theology and spiritual formation, likes to tell the story of teaching on this very passage in a local church a number of years ago and doing his very best to make all the dynamics clear. And after there was discussion at the end of the Sunday school hour, he invited a long-time Christian man, a church lay-leader, to close the group in prayer. And the man said, among other things,

“Father, we’re so grateful that we’re not like this Pharisee.”

It’s so easy for us not to get it. But the two prongs are spelled out as clearly as possible in the second half of verse 14,

“For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled.”

The point we should learn from the Pharisee and

“those who humble themselves will be exalted”

point we should learn from the tax collector.

The other two-point parable that I think can be diagrammed with a horizontal line with contrasting figures without an explicit master figure in the story itself is found at the end of the two accounts in Matthew and Luke of Jesus’ great sermon, the end

of Matthew 7 and Luke 6. There are a few interesting differences that suggest Luke may have rephrased, to make the same points, a little bit of the imagery to fit his less Jewish and more Greek audience, but we'll just take a look at Matthew's version in 7:24–27.

“Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

This one is almost too simple.

Of course, build a solid foundation for a house. No one would dispute that. There is no surprise in this passage as to who the good model is and who the bad model is as there was in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. If you build on sand, who knows? Jesus may have been thinking of one of the wadis or dry gulches that dot the land of Israel. I've had the privilege of hiking alongside the Wadi Qelt, which more or less follows the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho; and most of the year there is a trickle of a stream running through the bottom. You could walk over it and not get anything more than your feet wet. But once a year, sometimes not even that often, once every other year there will be unusual storms and—as can happen here where I live in the Rocky Mountains as well—there will be a flash flood. And if you should be foolish enough to have put up a tent or some other kind of temporary structure on the edge of that creek, you'll be washed away to your death as tragically has also happened at times in Colorado and other places with similar topography.

There's no surprise here in terms of the story. The surprise is how patently obvious it is and yet how often we defy it. We defy it when we hear stories of tourists who, defying everything they're told, think they can stand at the edge of the Niagara River and wade in without losing their balance and being swept over the falls to their death. And if that's true at a literal level, how much more is it not tragically true at the spiritual level? People build what seem to be adequate foundations for their lives on all kinds of species, alternatives to Christ's word and the truth of the gospel, which

alone is an adequate foundation carved into solid rock to support us for now and eternity.

Part 2: Two-Point Parables with a Solitary Subordinate

In this segment, we want to look at three short parables that I believe fit the two-point or two-pronged model that can be diagrammed with a short vertical line, a master figure, and a solitary subordinate of some kind without any contrast or foil. The first one may be the least well known of all of the short narratives that are ever called parables, at least I have almost never heard it discussed in church circles. In Luke 17, in a section with several short bits of Jesus' teaching unified on the topic of faith, Jesus says, (Luke 17:7–10),

“Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? Won’t he rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?”

Now before we read verse 10, it's important to say that we don't live—at least most of us, I assume, who will be listening and watching these videos—in contexts of servants and certainly not in the context of slavery. It may seem harsh. We may be distracted by thoughts about the inappropriateness of indentured servitude, but Jesus is not commenting on the morality of this one way or the other. As in all of His parables, He is simply taking very common, very lifelike situations and, as we've seen—I trust by now it's no surprise—with a twist somewhere in the story or the context or the application of each of His parables deriving a spiritual lesson or lessons from the story.

This is a rhetorical question. More literally, it is one giant question that's hard to preserve in English without us getting lost in the grammar that says, if one of you has a servant doing this and you say, would you say, wouldn't you rather say, would you think, everyone would say. Well, duh, of course not. That's not the master-servant relationship. Even the most generous of masters is not going to invite his servant to eat with him, and he's certainly not going to say,

“Make your own meal first and then serve me later.”

But what's the spiritual application? Verse 10,

“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.’”

There really are two prongs here; and commentators and writers in books on parables who do include this little story sometimes debate: Is the attention on what the master says and the implicit ridiculousness of these alternative scenarios that Jesus is rhetorically proposing, or is the focus on the response of the servant in verse 10? But if there's a lesson to be learned from each main character, then we don't have to choose between those two. We can say, yes, God has the right to command us to do whatever He wants. But secondly, no matter how arduous the task, no matter how faithful we've been, we're still simply responding to God's gracious overtures to us in the first place. He commands us after He saves us; and we should say we're only unworthy servants. We've just done our duty.

A second passage, similarly structured and maybe not much better-known, occurs in Mark 4 right after the longer and better-known passage of the soil and some interpretive and supplementary remarks that it leads to. In Mark 4:26–29 we read, Jesus also said,

“This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

If you're just looking for a single point of comparison, you can endlessly debate whether the focus is in the first part of this short narrative on the farmer. The fact that there is this period of time when after he does all he can to sow the seed and prepare the ground, he has to trust in the processes of cultivation. A believer has to trust that God is sovereignly watching over the work and the growth.

Is that the main point, or should it be focusing on the end result of the seed itself? In verse 29, the grain does in fact ripen and it becomes harvested, useful for the purposes for which it was planted. Or should we admit that both of those are genuine spiritual lessons of this two-pronged passage that focuses alternately both

on the farmer and on the seed? By now, you won't be surprised to hear me say, I think it's the latter.

And then there's a just slightly longer story and certainly, I think, better-known that follows this model in Luke 12 often called the rich fool set in a context of teaching about economic matters (beginning in Luke 12:13).

"Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.' Jesus replied, 'Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbitrator between you?'"

And somebody might say, "Jesus, I don't mean to be cantankerous but haven't you likened yourself to a judge more than once?" But the point is in this context, there's obviously some kind of a dispute between a couple of brothers over inheritance. They're trying to draw Jesus into a situation that He doesn't have to be drawn into. Why is there this dispute in the first place? He intuitively it has something to do with greed. The word *pleonexia* translated greed in verse 15 can also be translated covetousness, and so He says,

"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."

Wow. We could just stop right there. Have we even begun to learn that in Western Christianity? But to illustrate the principle and to make the point, hopefully more memorably, He tells them this parable:

"The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. [Apparently an unexpectedly abundant harvest.] He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain.'"

Isn't that good stewardship? What else could he do?

"And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink and be merry.'"

Ah, now we're starting to get a hint of what's going on here, but we need to review the cultural context of the first-century part of the Roman Empire. There was no middle class as we think of it today. We hear some people in our world talk about the disappearing middle class, but we still have a middle class to rival

middle class compared to the ancient world. One to 2 percent of the people in the Ancient Roman Empire owned up to 50 percent of the property, including land. Up to 10 percent of the people at any time were literally in danger of dying if their lot in life didn't improve, either due to inadequate food or medicine or health or because they were permanently disabled in some way.

There may have been anywhere from 5 to generously 15 percent of the people who had enough possessions and enough access to resources that if one growing season or one season of sales in the marketplace went sour, they could still survive. Almost everybody else hovered just above a poverty line such that if circumstances deteriorated, they would fall down into that bottom 10 percent. There's something else that's important to observe about this passage.

In the Greek, either through the actual use of the word I or the suffix on the end of the verb that shows that it's the first-person singular, I appears eight times in just a few verses. The man thinks to himself, What shall I do? I have no place. This is what I'll do. I will store. I will say to myself, self . . . In that context, especially if you had an unexpected bumper crop, of course you should preserve some of it. But you should be generous in giving large amounts of it away. That was understood. That was Old Testament teaching. It continues to be New Testament teaching. God says to him,

“You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself? This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

It's not the possession of riches that is inherently bad, but it's what one does or does not do with them; and it's clear by this man's hoarding that he is not rich towards God. He has no true relationship with God. A student, years ago when I first began teaching, quoted the saying, *“You've never seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul,”* and I think this story summarizes that extremely well

Here, the second person in the parable is God Himself, not represented by anyone. God and the fool, because God alone knows when we will die; and as the news reminds us daily, people die unexpectedly in the most extraordinary of circumstances. We have to be prepared, the second prong of the passage, to meet Him whenever that should happen and show that we have a

relationship with Him because we have been good stewards of the resources He has merely loaned to us.

Part 3: Two More Short Parables with Two Prongs

In this video we want to look at three other short parables that have two prongs and make two points, I believe, in a simple top-down or vertical-line structure with a master figure and a sole subordinate. Another fairly little-known or little-discussed passage appears in Luke 13:6–9, the parable of a fig tree, where Jesus says,

“A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

No concluding remarks. No interpretive comments. But the parable is preceded by two real-life illustrations that help to create the larger context of the first nine verses of this chapter where people are present who tell Jesus about some kind of temple massacre.

On more than one occasion, we know from other historical sources, Roman troops killed Jewish worshipers, even in the temple precincts. And something like that is what is being referred to here. It says, they “told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.” Pilate being the governor of Judea—but almost certainly that doesn’t mean that he himself killed anyone; and it may not even mean literally that there’s some kind of chemical experiment going on here as it might sound. It’s just a graphic way of saying, just as Jews were sacrificing animals whose blood was spilled, so some people in the very process of that had their blood spilled by Roman soldiers for whatever reason. We’re not told. But Jesus gives a surprising answer when He says,

“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?”

Throughout time, in religious circles, including too often in Christian circles, the assumption is that people who suffer are

doing so for their own personal sin, and many times that is completely wrong. It's wrong in this context. Jesus says,

"I tell you, no!"

But then He adds,

"Unless you repent, you too will all perish."

He gives us a second, exactly analogous example of eighteen people who died when a tower in the neighborhood of Siloam in Jerusalem fell on them. Perhaps a construction accident.

"Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no!"

Same refrain,

"But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

When there is a natural disaster, when there is a manmade tragedy, the temptation is to blame the victims. What Jesus is saying is we should remind ourselves it could just as easily have been us. It might be in the future. We need to make sure we're right with God. In that context, the parable of the fig tree makes very good sense. Throughout the Old Testament, especially in the Prophets, a man enjoying life, sitting in peace and prosperity in his land under his own fig tree is a recurring motif or way of designating Israel at peace, enjoying God's blessings.

Here's a fig tree that is being threatened with destruction. One can't help but relate it to the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day with whom He comes in conflict on more than one occasion. Should the focus be on the farmer's command, *"Cut it down!"* (the threat of imminent destruction), or should the focus be on the vinedresser speaking on behalf of the tree, which can't speak, pleading for a little bit more time to produce fruit? And the answer is yes. That's where the focus should be on both of those points. Destruction is imminent if there isn't repentance, but there's a little time left so take advantage of it, otherwise you'll be cut down.

Then we flip a few chapters to Luke 18 and read the story of, well, some people call it the unjust judge. Other people call it the persistent widow. An authority figure, a subordinate, and those two names suggest the two prongs. There's an unjust judge

who doesn't fear God, doesn't care what people think. There's a widow—a paradigm of powerlessness in a patriarchal culture—without a husband, perhaps too old to still have her father alive to represent her. She may have had male children. They don't figure into the story either. There's no reason for this unjust judge to grant justice against her adversary. He refuses repeatedly, but the widow is persistent; persistence that annoys him, that tires him. Perhaps speaking a little hyperbolically, he (at the end of verse 5) says,

"I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!"

The Greek is a metaphor for give somebody a black eye. Not that the judge's guards would ever let her get that close to him for a tap, literally, but we understand the point.

Then the Lord says,

"Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night. Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly."

God is like the judge, not that He's unjust. This is a comparison of what the rabbis called from the lesser to the greater. If even an unjust human authority can be badgered into granting justice, how much more is God not eager to dispense justice? But Jesus doesn't stop there.

In the last half of verse 8, He asks the rhetorical question.

"However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

There've been other parables that suggest that, from a human timetable, God's granting justice, which ultimately and completely can happen only when Christ returns and issues in the final judgment of all people, may seem by our timetables to be delayed. We get frustrated with how much time passes and injustice still reigns. Will we still trust God's promise to right all wrongs one day so that when Jesus, the Son of Man returns, He will find faith left on the earth? Is the parable about God being willing to grant justice even more so than this judge did, or is it about the need to have persevering, clinging, tenacious faith as the widow did?

Once again, I think the answer is yes.

And then, finally, flipping back a few pages in Luke, a parable that is strikingly similar to this last one but with a few interesting twists: Luke 11:5–8, in a context where Jesus is teaching about prayer, asking another rhetorical question—another from the lesser to the greater type of logic.

*“Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.’ And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you bread because of friendship, yet because of your [well, I’m just going to use the Greek word here for a moment, *anaideia*], he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.”*

And that leads into Jesus’ teaching on asking God and receiving from God who wants to give good gifts to His children.

We need to picture the setting here: a small Galilean village with homes very close to each other. Everyone’s business is heard by others. A friend arriving at the door of a friend of his at midnight, maybe it doesn’t happen in our world, that in itself is not all that extraordinary. People walked or rode donkeys traveling between towns. There were no phones to call ahead and tell people when they were going to be arriving. There were no GPS or satnavs to tell you how long the journey would take; and if you were traveling in the heat of summer, you might wait until it was dusk and it was a little bit cooler. Nothing unusual yet.

We also have to understand hospitality in a culture like this. Somebody comes late and is tired. We don’t know if they’ve had dinner. The three loaves of bread would have been hand- or fist-sized loaves. This was not some huge quantity of food. It wasn’t a gourmet meal. It was just enough to tide them over, perhaps with some water, so that they could go to sleep. Bread was baked fresh every day. More often than not, how much bread a given family could make varied depending on their circumstances and how much they consumed. They may have eaten all that they had but knew that a neighbor had a little bit left over. Still nothing unusual.

And so you go to the neighbor's house and knock, and there's nothing unusual about the neighbor being a bit frustrated because multiple people often slept together, at least for heat, in a small bed; a door was locked with a big padlock. Sometimes a milk cow or a sheep or a goat spent the night with some fodder right by that door on a ground level, and the people in a kind of split-level house lived up a level. It would have been a headache to wake people up. Maybe wake the cow up, undo the padlock.

"Yet"

Jesus says,

"because of your shameless audacity, he will surely get up and give you as much as you need."

Some translations say "*persistence*," in which case this parable is no different than the parable of the persistent widow. Some say "*boldness*," that gets at it a little bit better. The NIV says, "*your shameless audacity*." That's better still. The King James says, "*your importunity*." That's a perfect rendering, but who in today's world knows what importunity means?

Maybe the Yiddish chutzpah gets at it or the English moxie. It's persistence with an edge. It's boldness that is willing to violate what in some contexts might violate cultural norms, but not in this one. The ESV says, "*because of your impudence*." However we translate it, yes, it's about God's willingness to give. Yes, it's about our needing to ask. But don't be afraid to come to God, especially when it's for the sake of helping others. It has a little bit of an edge.

"Lord, this person I care deeply about isn't getting justice darn it all. Would you provide some justice?"

God can handle that. He's handled it for centuries.

We might need to be more tactful in talking with fellow humans but we can pour out our souls honestly to God. We are coming down the home stretch in our study of Jesus' parables. We have looked at a whole barrage of passages and suggested that the vast majority contain three or at least two characters or central details. We've been suggesting that levels of meaning or symbolism, the spiritual lesson if you like, of a story derives from focusing on those main characters, that we are not to allegorize the parables in

great detail as various people have done throughout the centuries, and that those passages that do have a considerable supporting detail do so because those details are relevant to understanding the story in its first-century lifelike, realistic setting. And, nevertheless, we have also seen that in even some of the shorter passages somewhere, there is almost always a surprise.

Often it is a surprise about who the good character was when there was a contrast between good and evil. Sometimes it was a surprise in who Jesus was applying the passage to or how he was applying it, but we still have a few passages left that really do seem to have only one central character and are short enough that the wisdom of Adolf Jülicher, that we talked about very near the beginning of this series, to try to boil every passage down to a single proposition does make some sense.

Intriguingly, the six obvious examples of this fall into three pairs. It's almost as if Jesus realized the parable was so short that it could use some reinforcement with a parallel analogy. An example of this is the twin parables of the mustard seed and the parable that is alternately called the yeast or the leaven in Matthew. We find these back-to-back in 13:3. Jesus tells another parable in a series of teaching parables in Matthew 13, and He says,

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches” (vv. 31–32).

A mustard seed was common. It is still to this day in parts of Galilee in the springtime when the flowers are in bloom. I've had the privilege of seeing them. The plants are typically about four feet tall. On rare occasions, a mustard plant would grow to the size of a very large bush or a very small tree, whichever way you want to think of it; and it's also the case that of all of the seeds that were regularly cultivated in Israel, the mustard seed was the smallest. It would not be realistic to expect Jesus to be giving a highly scientific statement here in a developed figure of speech like a parable. That some critics have pointed out that technically the mustard seed isn't the smallest of all seeds in the world is really irrelevant. It was in terms of anything that simple Galilean farmers knew.

What's Jesus doing? He's taking a well-known object that is

proverbially small. Elsewhere, He talks about wishing His followers would have faith, even just the size of a mustard seed, as opposed to none at all. He's taking something that's proverbially small and saying it can grow, when it is a symbol of the kingdom of heaven, into something big enough to be called a tree big enough so that even birds will come and perch in its branches, which is the surprise, the possible but not common experience with mustard plants. Surprising endings out of small beginnings. It's not any more complicated than that, but if you don't relate to a farmer, it may be that Jesus has the men and the women in His audience in mind here because He moves from what in the first century was typically a man's job to what was typically a woman's job.

Then in verse 33, we read,

"He told them still another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.'"

If you're familiar with baking bread, there's nothing surprising about bread rising even after just a tiny bit of yeast or a lump of leaven is put into that dough. But again, the surprise here is the size mixed into about sixty pounds of flour—or twenty-seven kilograms, we read in our footnote, for those who follow the metric system—to permeate a batch of dough of that size and make it rise is unusual.

I remember the first time as a young boy watching my mother make bread from scratch. You know how many Westerners do that anymore? And I was surprised at how big a batch of bread resulted from very small beginnings. These parables are meant to encourage the disciples—far enough into the ministry that Jesus is receiving increased opposition—and to them the appearance may be that His movement, this arrival of the kingdom that He keeps talking about, is very minuscule and insignificant and without much power. He says one day that will all be different.

Another pair of parallel, short, single-pointed parables comes in Luke 14, perhaps not quite as well known as the parables of Matthew 13. Right after the story of the great banquet that we looked at in a previous segment, we read in verse 25 of Luke 14 that

"large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and

mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

Fortunately, we have a parallel in Matthew that reminds us that hate and love in both ancient Greek and Hebrew could often mean to prefer significantly less or prefer significantly more. They don’t necessarily have emotional overtones.

But now comes the twin short parable (Luke 14:28).

“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, ‘This person began to build and wasn’t able to finish.’ Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won’t he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.”

There’s actually a crescendo here. The first story talks about counting the cost of starting a project and not being able to finish it.

The main problem that Jesus points to is ridicule from the public, if this is a public project. But then He ups the ante some; the stakes are higher. What about going to war against an army that’s twice the size of yours? Now you risk much more than ridicule. You risk the loss of huge amounts of lives, perhaps including your own. And then in the concluding sentence, we reach a zenith or a climax to this sequence when He says you must “*give up everything*.” The word might better be translated “*renounce*.” It’s not that we literally give away everything we have, though occasionally Jesus has called people to do that, but we renounce any exclusive claim on what we have so that all that we have on loan from God can be used for His kingdom purposes. But the one simple message that binds the two parables together is to count the cost.

Finally, we return to Matthew 13 for two even shorter passages, if that is possible, again back-to-back: the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price in Matthew 13:44–46. Jesus

says,

“The kingdom of heaven is like a 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. Again the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”

Again, they’re not absolutely identical, just as the mustard seed and leaven looked at what in the first century were typically men’s and women’s jobs, just as the two parables of counting the cost had different stakes behind them.

Here we have what are largely parallel passages, but in the first case it appears that the man stumbles across it. It simply says a man found a treasure hidden in a field. It doesn’t say he was digging for buried treasure. With so many wars dotting the landscape over the decades in Israel’s history, at the time of Jesus it was not unknown for someone to be plowing their fields to plant, or traveling and sitting beside a tree and maybe leaning into some loose ground realizing there was a point of a hard object, or after a storm or some other landscape-changing event for a box of money to emerge close to the surface of the ground where someone had tried to safeguard it when fleeing the country or fleeing his property in a previous age, hoping to be able to return but never doing so.

In the second case, the merchant is an oyster fisherman. He’s seeking after fine pearls. But whether accidentally stumbling across a treasure or intentionally seeking and finding it, the point is the same. Give up everything that is necessary for you to be able to claim it. The kingdom of God is so valuable that we must be prepared to sacrifice whatever it takes in order to be a part of it.