

Orcutt Christian Church

A Grace Driven Church for Grace Needing People!

Burning Question #56

What Is Hell?

Luke 16:19-31

June 10, 2018

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Saturday 6/9 Clean Up: Mike Rylant

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Luke 16:19-31 (GW)

19 “There was a rich man who wore expensive clothes. Every day was like a party to him. **20** There was also a beggar named Lazarus who was regularly brought to the gate of the rich man's house. **21** Lazarus would have eaten any scraps that fell from the rich man's table. Lazarus was covered with sores, and dogs would lick them. **22** “One day the beggar died, and the angels carried him to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. **23** He went to hell, where he was constantly tortured. As he looked up, in the distance he saw Abraham and Lazarus. **24** He yelled, ‘Father Abraham! Have mercy on me!’

Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water to cool off my tongue. I am suffering in this fire.' ²⁵ “Abraham replied, ‘Remember, my child, that you had a life filled with good times, while Lazarus’ life was filled with misery. Now he has peace here, while you suffer. ²⁶ Besides, a wide area separates us. People couldn't cross it in either direction even if they wanted to.’ ²⁷ “The rich man responded, ‘Then I ask you, Father, to send Lazarus back to my father's home. ²⁸ I have five brothers. He can warn them so that they won't end up in this place of torture.’ ²⁹ “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses' {Teachings} and the Prophets. Your brothers should listen to them!’ ³⁰ “The rich man replied, ‘No, Father Abraham! If someone comes back to them from the dead, they will turn to God and change the way they think and act.’ ³¹ “Abraham answered him, ‘If they won't listen to Moses' {Teachings} and the Prophets, they won't be persuaded even if someone comes back to life.’”

Bonnie Ware is an Australian nurse who, specializes in care of the terminally ill.

In 2009 Bonnie wrote an on-line article called *Regrets of the Dying* about her time as a palliative carer.

<https://bronnieware.com/regrets-of-the-dying/>

The top five regrets discovered by the nurse include:

- 5. *I wish that I had let myself be happier.***
- 4. *I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.***
- 3. *I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.***
- 2. *I wish I hadn't worked so hard.***

And the number one big regret, discovered by nurse Bronnie Ware:

- 1. *I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.***

This is the most common regret of all.

"Most people had to die knowing that it was due to choices they had made, or not made."

Do these big regrets ring true?

What would you regret if this were your last day on earth?

Ron Wayne was one of the founders of Apple, along with Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak.

He helped to steer the computer company in its early days, and had a hand in designing the famous Apple logo.

Wayne owned 10 percent of the company, while Jobs and Wozniak each owned 45 percent.

But Wayne decided to hand back his stake, fearing that he would be liable for a portion of a \$15,000 loan if the company went under.

Apple succeeded, of course, and if Wayne had held on to his stake it would now be worth more than \$93 billion.

Does he have any regrets?

Surprisingly, no.

"I made my decision on the information I had at the time. I've got my health, my family and integrity -- and that is the best fortune you could ask for."

Do you believe him?

93 BILLION dollars -- and NO regrets?

Today's sermon has a lot to say about regrets!

Does the title of the sermon give you problems?

It does me!

My mother would wash my mouth out with her home made lye soap for using the word.

I still have a problem with it.

Jesus tells the story of a rich man who **wore expensive clothes.**

Every day was like a party to him

The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ He went to hell, where he was constantly tortured.

Does he have any regrets?

Jesus implies that he does.

But none of his regrets involve poor business decisions or missed opportunities to make money.

His life choices land him in hell!

What is Hell?

Hell is a real place, with real consequences that you wouldn't want your worst enemy to experience.

Jesus tells us "**One day the beggar died, and the angels carried him to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.**"

And there, in Hell, we begin to get a sense of the rich man's regrets.

Regret Number 3. *I wish that I had cared for the people around me.*

The poor man Lazarus was lying at his gate, covered with sores and the rich man stepped over or around him each time he left his home.

Every single day, the rich man missed a chance to help Lazarus by simply giving him the leftovers from his table.

Regret Number 2. *I wish that I had listened to Moses and the prophets.*

The rich man realizes in death that he had not paid attention to the word of God as it came through Moses, "**you shall love your neighbor as yourself**" (Leviticus 19:18).

He had not heeded the prophet Isaiah, who commanded, "**share your bread with the hungry ... bring the homeless poor into your house**" (Isaiah 58:7).

The **hungry** and **homeless poor** are fellow Israelites.

And, the Apostle Paul tells us in
Galatians 6:10 (NIV)

10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Regret Number 1. *I wish I'd had the courage to live a life dedicated to God, not to myself, nor the life others expected of me.*

Every day, the rich man ignored poor Lazarus, fully aware of the teachings of Moses and the prophets.

But he didn't have the courage to live a life of integrity, one in which his actions were in line with what he observed and what he was taught.

What I hope to do today is to give you reasons why you need not live a life of regrets.

Have you ever heard of “*Lifelock?*”

LifeLock is a company that for a monthly fee of \$10 guarantees they'll be able to protect you against “identity theft.”

I've never signed up for “LifeLock.”

But if someone ever does steal my identity, I know it will be devastating.

And I also know I'll probably wish I'd signed up for “LifeLock.”

But by then it will be too late.

I have a attorney friend here in Santa Maria whose identity was ripped off, and it took her years to untangle the mess.

So I say again, "What I hope to do today is to give you reasons why you need not live a life of regrets."

No matter our age, whether 13 years old, or 90, we all have one thing in common.

Some day this life as we know it will end.

It's one of the few things you can count on to happen.
We don't like to think about it much because it's sad.
However, I know that God has provided a way to think about our future.

If you are here to investigate what God and the afterlife are all about, you've come on a great day.
If you've wondered what motives God to do what He's done, this is a good day.

With Luke 16, Jesus finishes up what for Him must have been a long day of teaching because it covers three full chapters, which is the same number of chapters taken up by His famous Sermon on the Mount.

The three-chapter teaching of the Sermon on the Mount came within weeks of the beginning of His ministry, while the three-chapters here in Luke 14, 15, and 16 takes places within weeks of His death and resurrection.

The text for today reveals as much about what motivated Jesus as any story He ever told.

In Luke 16 He tells the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

It deals with life here on earth, and life after death.

It deals with choices that affect our life here and now, and affect our life in the life to come.

And, this is **NOT** a parable.

About a hundred years after the Apostle John, the Christian scholar and minister, Tertullian, wrote that this is a true account that Jesus cited to inform the Pharisees they were placing their trust in money and not in God.

I. Life Here on Earth

In this text, we meet four main characters.

We meet the Rich Man, and we meet Lazarus.

We know that the story is primarily about the Rich Man, because Jesus tells us so in the opening verse.

He starts by saying, “*There was a rich man...*”

When Jerome translated the Greek New Testament into Latin in the 4th century, he used the Latin word "dives."

The traditional name, Dives, is not actually a name, but instead the old Latin word for "rich man."

The rich man was also given the names Neuēs (i.e. Nineveh) and Fineas (i.e. Phineas) in the 3rd and 4th centuries.

Then Jesus tells us how lavishly this rich guy dressed and ate and lived every day.

The 17th century Anglican priest, Richard Crashaw wrote a stanza for his **Steps to the Temple** in 1646 entitled, "Upon Lazarus His Tears":

*Rich Lazarus! richer in those gems, thy tears,
Than Dives in the robes he wears:
He scorns them now, but oh they'll suit full well
With the purple he must wear in hell.*

This rich man is not a nice guy.

He's a callused man who thinks about very few people besides himself.

We know this because of the way he treats **the second character in the story**.

A guy who is dropped off at his front gate every day named Lazarus.

The name *Lazarus* was a shortened form of *Eleazar* (meaning "he whom God helps"), and was a common one in Jesus' day.

This was also the same name as the man whom Jesus raised from the dead in John 11, the brother of Mary and Martha.

Lazarus is absolutely dependent upon God, and he knows it. He's in bad physical condition, there are sores all over his body.

Day after day after day friends leave Lazarus at the rich guy's front gate, and day after day after day, he's ignored and allowed to suffer without so much as a prayer or a crumb of bread.

Some think that the mention of the dogs is to show that even the vicious dogs were kinder to him than the rich man.

In the story, Jesus says, Lazarus **would have eaten any scraps that fell from the rich man's table**

Now, when you and I hear those words, we think of a table, probably fashioned out of walnut, sitting about so high off the ground, maybe with a throw rug under it, surrounded by modern furniture and artwork.

But remember, Jesus is telling this story to first century Palestinians, so the image in His mind and the image in their mind is far different than a 21st century dining room.

When Jesus said those words, everyone in His audience had a picture of a Middle Eastern banquet, with guests and servants, and lookers-on watching and waiting for the after-dinner entertainment.

Henry Baker Tristram, was a late 19th century Church of England minister, academic, and missionary to Israel.

H.B. Tristram wrote this description of how evening banquets at rich guys' houses went in 1894.

He said,

“...entertainment is a public affair. The gateway of the court, and the door... stand open... A long, low table, or more often merely the great wooden dishes, are placed along the center of the room, and low couches on either side, on which the guests, placed in order of their rank, recline, leaning on their left elbow, with their feet turned away from the table. ... Servants stand behind the couches ...Behind the servants the loungers of the village crowd in, nor are they thought obtrusive in so doing.”

The eaters reclined at a slightly raised table, waited on by servants, and watched by peasants who were allowed into the home to enjoy the entertainment that would come after dinner.

Lazarus, sores and all, is one of those “loungers,” in the background.

He’s called by Jesus, “**a beggar.**”

The fact that Jesus gives this beggar a name is significant. If you study all of Jesus’ parables, you’ll discover that this is the only one in which he gives a proper name to one of the characters in his story.

No where does Luke mention that this is a story or a parable. What Jesus is telling here is an actual story of two real people. And Jesus concludes the story with Lazarus dying and being carried heaven, and the rich man dying and going to hell.

The godly character of Lazarus is both revealed and implied. His faith in God caused him to accept without complaining the miserable existence he had on earth.

His continued effort to improve his condition and make the best of what opportunity he had shows that he maintained his courage in spite of his helpless condition.

The impressive silence of Lazarus throughout the account has been pointed out.

Dr. Alfred Plummer say Lazarus does not

“murmur against God’s distribution of wealth, nor against the rich man’s abuse of it, in this world. And in Hades he neither exults over the change of relations between himself and Dives, nor protests against being asked to wait upon him in the place of torment, or to go errands for him to the visible world.”

Those who suffer long and much often develop great patience.

II. Life After Death

This is where development of the story takes place, where the two other characters in the story are introduced, and where it becomes clear why Jesus told this story.

A. The Third Character.

The third character in the story is now introduced.

It's **Abraham**, the spiritual father of the Jewish nation.

The angels deposit poor Lazarus at Abraham's side, literally, right up next to his chest.

Luke 16:22 (NASB)

22 *"Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom*

What Jesus is describing here is another banquet.

Only this is a banquet that Lazarus has been invited to.

At this banquet, he's not an on-looker in the background, he's not a servant waiting tables, he's an honored guest, seated right next to Abraham himself.

See, when Jesus says, Lazarus *was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom*

What everyone pictured was Abraham reclining at table.

And who is Abraham?

He's the founder of Judaism.

If people recline around the table in order of their rank, where is Abraham reclining?

At the head of the table.

They don't get more important than that.

And if Lazarus is right next to Abraham, what does it say about how the host of the banquet feels about him?

He's about as special as it gets.

Here's a picture to grasp: Jesus is telling the story of a guy who in this life, rarely if ever got treated well.

He didn't get breaks, he didn't get opportunities, he didn't get honors or recognition.

All throughout his life, he was hungry, covered in massive sores, and totally ignored.

But in the next life?

The seat right between the arms of Abraham.

That's the picture of Lazarus' afterlife.
He's at the great banquet beside Father Abraham.

Thomas Moore (1779–1852) was an Irish songwriter, singer, and poet.

His talents brought joy to many who saw him perform or who sang his music.

Yet, tragically, his personal life was troubled by repeated heartaches, including the death of all five of his children during his lifetime.

Moore's personal wounds make these words of his all the more meaningful:

**“Here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish;
earth hath no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.”**

The apostle Paul also saw how our heavenly Father can provide solace to the hurting heart.

To the believers at Corinth he wrote:

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NASB)

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

B. The Contrast of the Rich Man

In contrast to that, where does the rich man wind up?

Hell!

His callused heart and self-sufficiency and unresponsiveness to God get him delivered to the place of his own making and choosing.

All of his life he's lived as if he didn't need God.

All of his life he's put God at arms-length.

In effect, he has said, *“I don't want you in my life. I want to be my own lord, my own God.”*

So in the afterlife, God grants his wish, just like He does with all those who choose to ignore or fend off or push away from His invitations.

Now, this raises a question: **Why does hell exist?**

Hell exists so that people who choose to exclude God from their lives can have what they wish for for all eternity.

And even though God isn't everywhere obvious in this life, He is everywhere present and everywhere discernible.

Anyone who looks at the stars or considers what it must have taken to design and engineer a flower has to admit that the creator of this universe is unique and wonderful and full of beauty and ability, or He wouldn't have been able to pull off things like that.

In heaven, He's everywhere present and discernible, and in hell, He is deliberately absent and far-off, in order to respect the choice of those who have chosen against Him.

Which is what the rich man has done.

But the rich man never really thought about the consequences of his choice.

He never consciously verbalized to himself that pushing God away throughout his life on earth would mean he would spend eternity without Him.

So he's surprised when he finds himself in this terrible place.

And, according to Jesus, **he was constantly tortured.**

And this is where the point of the story begins to take shape.

Within micro-seconds of entering this godless destination, the rich guy is in agony.

And he begins a dialogue with Abraham about fixing what's gone wrong.

He sees Abraham up in heaven, so he shouts, **'Father Abraham! Have mercy on me! Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water to cool off my tongue. I am suffering in this fire.'**

The rich man appeals for help on the basis that he, too, is a son of Abraham.

He could not appeal on the basis of righteous character or loving service, for he had scorned his earthly opportunities.

Some commentators think this is having the rich man still arrogantly request that Lazarus be assigned to wait on him.

But there is no evidence that the rich man, while on earth, had ordered Lazarus about or tried to compel him to be his servant. He had simply neglected the beggar at his gate. His suffering in Hades is too great for him to have been arrogant in this request. He is humble in his request and asks for the help of Lazarus because he remembers him hanging around his gate.

And why does he call address Abraham as “**Father Abraham?**” I think this rich guy never imagined that his afterlife destination was hell.

He probable thought:

“I’m a good guy. I’m from an affluent family. I have lots of friends. I don’t cheat on my wife or short-change the waiter, or cheat on my income tax. Basically, I’m a good guy. Certainly, I’m a likable guy. Therefore, God’s going to let me into heaven.”

I'm sure he thought,

“And even if my social status and nice-guyness doesn’t get me in, I’m a descendant of Abraham, so I’m going to get in based on my lineage, based on who I’m related to.”

He doesn't realize that John the Baptist wiped out that delusion when he said

Matthew 3:8-9 (NASB)

8 "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; 9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father';

So he yells, “**Father Abraham**, *It’s me, your descendant. Have mercy on me. I shouldn’t be down here. Maybe you can fix this.*”

And how does Abraham reply?

a wide area separates us

There’s a huge, immovable chasm between where I am and where you are.

You made some decisions on earth, and those decisions are final now.”

This starts the formerly-rich man thinking.

C. Our Eternal Destiny is Determined Before Death

It’s at this point that the climax of the story takes place.

Look at this next line from the formerly rich guy:

‘Then I ask you, Father, to send Lazarus back to my father's home. ²⁸ I have five brothers. He can warn them so that they won't end up in this place of torture.’

What’s the rich guy asking for in this request?

He’s asking for the salvation of those he loves.

Just seconds in hell was enough to turn this self-contained, self-sufficient rich guy into an ardent evangelist.

Here’s what I observe from this story.

1. According to Jesus, our location in eternity is not based on social standing or lineage. It’s based on grace.

This rich guy bet everything on himself – his social status, and his ethnic background. And he lost.

What he didn’t know was what the Apostle Paul later went around telling everyone who would listen.

The Apostle Paul would share...

Titus 3:4-7 (CSB)

⁴ But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, ⁵ he saved us?— not by works of

righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy — through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit. ⁶ He poured out his Spirit on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we may become heirs with the hope of eternal life.

His grace.

His cheerful willingness to grant forgiveness to anyone who is honest enough to admit that they are not God, but that they need God in their lives, that at their core, they are morally flawed and in need of a savior.

That was probably a lot easier for Lazarus to do than for the rich guy, because all his life Lazarus had had to depend on God, so he knew what humility was.

He wasn't too proud to ask for forgiveness.

And God not only granted it, which would be mercy.

He gave him far more than just forgiveness.

He gave him grace.

So instead of just getting into heaven, he gets a seat at the right hand of Abraham.

Instead of getting what he deserves, he gets forgiven.

And instead of just getting forgiven, he gets blessed by one of the best seats in the house.

2. Jesus points out the permanency of the afterlife.

Abraham says, **People couldn't cross it in either direction even if they wanted to.**

According to Jesus,

Our location in eternity is permanent.

Once we've crossed over, it's done.

Final, no returns.

Only the living can ask for grace.

Which is why prophet after prophet in the OT would say things like,

Isaiah 55:6 (GW)

6 Seek the LORD while he may be found. Call on him while he is near.

Why?

Because he won't always be near.

If you choose to push him away, he will place himself far away from you in eternity.

The Apostle Paul says,

2 Corinthians 6:2 (TEV)

2 Hear what God says:... Listen! This is the hour to receive God's favor; today is the day to be saved!

Why?

Because when this life passes, we get to live forever with the consequences of our choice.

3. Hell turns a hardened anti-God type person into a evangelist.

When I read this story, I had to admit the inescapable truth.

Which is that hell is a real place, and real people go there.

It is a place of torment and agony.

The Bible says that it's a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

It's the sound of deep regret when you say, "*Why didn't I listen? Why was I so stubborn? Why did I hold God at arms-length all my life?*"

In hell, this ardent anti-God guy starts pleading that someone go and share the truth with his brothers, because he wouldn't want anyone he loves to join him there.

And what's Abraham's response to this?

He says, '**They have Moses' {Teachings} and the Prophets. Your brothers should listen to them!**'

The formerly-rich guy says, '**No, Father Abraham! If someone comes back to them from the dead, they will turn to God and change the way they think and act.'**

And Abraham says, **'If they won't listen to Moses' {Teachings} and the Prophets, they won't be persuaded even if someone comes back to life.'**"

Remember I said that there are four characters in this story?

Here's where **the fourth one** gets introduced.

I think **the fourth person** is Jesus.

He's only a few weeks away from going to the Cross, and He knows it.

He knows He's going to rise from the dead and offer salvation to every person who is humble enough and honest enough and courageous enough to trust Him and what He did for them on the Cross.

But He knows that some will reject Him.

And I just picture Him as being really sad as He ends the story.

Think about all He's gone through during His long, long teaching session that day.

He's started out at the home of a Pharisee.

He heals a guy with dropsy, to the consternation of these hard-hearted people.

And then he tells them the story of the Great Banquet, the party in heaven.

And He tells them the story of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin and the Lost Sons.

And then he turns to His disciples who have been patiently listening from behind Him, and He tells them the story of the shrewd manager who bet everything he had on the reputation of the master.

He finishes the session telling this story – a story that focuses not on this life, but on the life to come.

A story that reminds us that hell is real, and terrible, and that grace is available to the least attractive of beggars, who will be welcomed into heaven by the likes of Abraham if they'll only accept God's grace.

And I think He's saying to the disciples,

“You gotta know how important this all is. In a few days, I’m going to give my life as a sin-sacrifice. I’m going to die and I’m going to rise from the dead. Why? Because hell is real, and I want to prevent as many as possible from going there. – But, even if I rise from the dead, some won’t believe. They’re going to need someone like you to teach them what God says about eternity and how to get there. They’re going to need someone like you to give them Moses and the Prophets.”

And that is the mission we here at Orcutt Christian Church willingly take on.

We’ll serve.

We’ll pray.

We’ll invite.

We’ll try to do things in a way that makes visitors feel welcome and enables them to understand what God is saying to them about Himself and the way to heaven.

Because Hell is real, and we want as few people as possible to go there.”

The church really only has one goal.

That’s to help people come to know Christ, and help people grow in Christ.

And each of us has a part.

Let me try to picture it with you.

Remember the picture Jesus gave

Matthew 25:31-33 (NASB)

31 "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. 32

"All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; 33 and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.

Now, let's put over there on the right all here who consider themselves sheep, and over there on the left those who are goats. How will we get those on the left to join us over here on the right? The only way I know is to invite them to join us.

What if all of us stood in this side of the room with our mouths closed and our hands at our sides, how likely is it that the folk on the left are going to have their lives changed? Not very likely.

And, yet, if we do our part, both we and they will be changed. Both groups will experience changed lives because they are walking in union with the Lord.

As Paul says:

Galatians 2:19-21 (GW)

¹⁹ I live in a relationship with God. I have been crucified with Christ. ²⁰ I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live I live by believing in God's Son, who loved me and took the punishment for my sins. ²¹ I don't reject God's kindness.

So, I urge you to take seriously your decisions about your relationship to our Lord Jesus Christ.

don't reject God's kindness.

Prayer and Invitation

June 10 Lesson 2 (NIV) **Parables of God's Just Kingdom**

Devotional Reading: Psalm 78:1-8

Background Scripture: Matthew 13:24-43

MATTHEW 13:24-33

24 Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. 26 When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. 27 “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ 28 “‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. “The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ 29 “‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’” 31 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. 32 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.” 33 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.”

KEY VERSE

Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.—

Matthew 13:30

Introduction

A. A Different Kind of Riddle

Most of us enjoy the challenge of a good riddle. The best riddles challenge our minds to solve a problem of language and logic. They can prove hard to solve but are also hard to forget. We may puzzle over them for days trying to solve them. When we discover

or learn the answer, the best riddles surprise us. We realize that they have exposed our assumptions, our normal ways of thinking. These riddles challenge us to consider how often we may miss the truth because we assume something that is not true.

Jesus is known for having taught in parables, a form of speech much like a riddle. Although his parables used commonly understood images and everyday events, they forced listeners to rethink their understanding of how God was working in the world. The parables combined familiar details with the demand for serious reflection.

Today's text is a selection from a much longer discourse that consists mostly of parables. The lessons Jesus taught in these parables challenged widely held (mis)conceptions of how God was to bring about his kingdom.

B. Lesson Background

Parables are prominent in Jesus' teaching in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The term *parable* translates a Greek word that indicates a saying or story implying a comparison. Jesus' parables always involved such comparisons. The key to their interpretation is observing the comparison that Jesus intended. That intent is signaled by the details of the parable, its context, any explanation that Jesus offered, and the parable's role in his wider teaching.

Each parable in today's text begins with some form of the phrase "The kingdom of heaven is like." The term refers to the fulfillment of God's promise to reverse the course of human life, establishing his reign in place of the tyrannous, selfish reign of sin and death. It is a kingdom, as Jesus later told Pilate, that "is from another place" ([John 18:36](#)).

For Jesus' audience, God's promise of a future kingdom had a strongly nationalistic focus. Many in Jesus' day expected God's promised kingdom to bring about the defeat of Israel's enemies, meaning the pagan empires that had ruled God's people for generations (compare [Acts 1:6](#)). God's kingdom, in other words, was expected to be a political and military kingdom like any other, only one ruled righteously and in submission to God.

What Do You Think?

How do we avoid errors regarding allegiances to God's kingdom and to earthly nations?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding errors that see such allegiances as completely compatible

Regarding errors that see such allegiances as completely incompatible

One way Jesus challenged this expectation was through parables. These gave a very different vision of God's promised kingdom. The sudden, decisive action of a powerful military ruler was not Jesus' picture. He used instead comparisons to farming, which involves patience, trust, and the passing of time. Rather than depict dramatic, obvious events that would capture the world's attention, he spoke of subtle but powerful processes that were hard to see except by the eye of faith.

Earlier in the context of today's passage from Matthew 13, Jesus had delivered and explained a parable about a man sowing seed in a field. The message of the kingdom of God is not something that yields instant, universal success. Rather, it often seems unsuccessful at first, as people respond without persistent faith to the good news of the kingdom. For those ready to hear and heed, Jesus explained his teaching. For others, the seeming difficulty of the message itself seemed to turn them away from belief. God's kingdom, Jesus taught, would divide people. Such divisions are apparent in the parables of our text as well.

How to Say It

CorinthiansKo-rin-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

GalatiansGuh-lay-shunz.

LeviticusLeh-vit-ih-kus.

I. Parable of the Weeds

(Matthew 13:24-30)

A. Secret Sabotage (vv. 24, 25)

24. Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field.

This parable seems, at first glance, to be like the previous one in that both involve the sowing of seed. But the similarity is

superficial. Here it is the *seed* that is *good*; in Matthew 13:8 it is the ground that is good. Other differences present themselves as well.

Jesus' contemporaries are familiar with agricultural terminology. Seed is spread by hand as a farmer walks through a field. With a sack of seed over his shoulder, he sows seed over cultivated ground—ground prepared to receive it. Seed is typically sown in the autumn, in anticipation of the winter rains that allow it to flourish. Wheat and barley are the staple grains planted in this way.

25. “But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away.

An *enemy* of the farmer now appears in the story, attempting to do him harm. *Weeds* translates a Greek word that refers to a kind that looks very much like wheat until it matures. These are not just weeds that threaten the growth of the crop. These are weeds easily confused with the crop itself.

Removing such weeds (also called *tares* in older translations) will be very difficult. But early in the story, the farmer and his workers do not recognize what has happened. The enemy conceals his act by doing it while everyone sleeps.

B. Damage Discovered (vv. 26-28)

26. “When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

As the plants begin to grow, the difference between the wheat and the weeds begins to become apparent. At first the two kinds of plants seem identical, but their differences become more apparent with time. Eventually the workers discern that their field is infested with weeds.

27. “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

As Jesus tells the story, *the owner’s servants* do not inform the master about the weeds in so many words. Rather, they ask how the situation has arisen. They know that their master is a good farmer who saw to it that *good seed* has been sown. The servants are at a loss to explain the weeds. But they assume that their master understands, so they ask him.

28. “‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. “The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’”

The master’s response is clear and decisive. He knows that only someone with malicious intent could have sown the weeds among the wheat.

The servants’ response is in line with conventional wisdom: weeds must be dealt with immediately. Every hour they live they draw water, sunlight, and nutrients away from the good plants. Surely the master will agree that the weeds must be dealt with immediately!

C. Temporary Coexistence (vv. 29, 30a)

29, 30a. “‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest.

The master’s reply is very different from what the servants expect. He will not have the weeds removed immediately. He wants to protect the good plants from being uprooted in the weeding process. Because *the weeds* and *the wheat* are growing so close together, weeding is bound to cause collateral damage.

What Do You Think?

How does our proximity to worldly weeds of sin affect the safeguards we adopt against them?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Individual vs. communal safeguards against unholy lifestyles

Individual vs. communal safeguards against ungodly definitions of success

Other

In the larger context, this is the second parable of Jesus that tells a story of seed and harvest (see Matthew 13:3-9). Jesus subsequently explains both parables to his disciples (13:18-23, 36-43). These explanations make clear that Jesus is not offering advice about agriculture but challenging his hearers to begin thinking differently about God’s kingdom.

Many in Jesus’ audience expect that when God’s king brings God’s kingdom into the world, both evil and evildoers will be judged and eliminated immediately. But Jesus tells a very different story. The

inbreaking of God's kingdom and the final judgment on evil are separated by an interval of time. During that interval, the people of the kingdom live alongside evildoers. A separation will indeed come, but only at *the harvest*.

WEEDS TO WHOM?

Joe and Bonnie missed their former neighbors. The Heinrichs had sold their house and moved into a long-term care facility. They had been the best of neighbors! Joe and Bonnie were sad to lose their compassionate Christian friends.

The new neighbors were quite different. Joe and Bonnie didn't know their names, but they did know that they were rowdy beer drinkers. The peace and quiet of the neighborhood was now shattered by loud music, loud voices, and cars without mufflers, squealing in and out at all hours of the night.

Because they were offended, Joe and Bonnie made no effort to get to know their new neighbors. They prayed that God would intervene and help them get rid of their "headache." But one Sunday morning as the two were walking to their car, Bibles in hand, something incredible happened: the lady next door said, "Hello." A brief conversation took place, cut short since Joe and Bonnie were headed for church. "Maybe you'd like to come with us sometime," Bonnie said offhandedly as she slid into the car seat. The next week the new neighbors were at Sunday worship. They were guests of Joe and Bonnie, who learned to trust God's ability to transform lives. Those we see as "weeds" to be removed immediately may be viewed differently by God.

—C. T.

What Do You Think?

How do you avoid taking "weeding justice" into your own hands?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When loved ones are hurt

When God's name is maligned

When your rights are violated

Other

D. Eternal Separation (v. 30b)

30b. "At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the

weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.”

The harvesters will follow the distinctive instructions we see here. The instructions are stated not only in terms of the final dispositions of *the weeds* and *the wheat*, but also of a certain sequence.

When requested by his disciples to do so, Jesus later identifies the elements of the parable this way (Matthew 13:37-39):

the sower of good seed → the Son of Man
the field → the world
good seed → the people of the kingdom
the weeds (tares) → the people of the evil one
the enemy → the devil
the harvest → the end of the age
the harvesters → angels

Jesus closes his explanation, as he did the earlier parable of the sower, by saying that the one who has ears must hear what he says (Matthew 13:9, 43). These are solemn warnings to listeners to think carefully about Jesus' teaching and to act on it wisely. The warnings echo words from the prophet Isaiah that Jesus quoted in the earlier context regarding those who hear God's Word but do not understand, and those who see but do not perceive (13:14). This spiritual deafness and blindness is traced to problems of the heart (13:15). Destruction awaits them (13:41, 42).

By contrast, those who follow Jesus and listen with willing hearts will discern the truth of God's kingdom. They are the ones who receive the fullness of God's blessing as they heed the message (Matthew 13:16, 17, 43).

Even so, Jesus' followers must expect to work in a field where weeds and wheat grow together until the harvest. We can expect to be surrounded continually by evil. We can expect frustration and discouragement because of that evil. We can even expect scorn and opposition from those who do not listen to the kingdom's call.

Thus we must be prepared to endure with patience as we serve in expectation of the Lord's bringing his kingdom to its fullness.

When that happens, the Lord's promise is that his people will be

with him in his kingdom, where all the disappointments and heartaches of a sinful world will have no place.

II. Parable of the Mustard Seed

(Matthew 13:31, 32)

A. From Tiny Seed (vv. 31, 32a)

31, 32a. He told them another parable: “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,

Matthew records 10 parables of Jesus using some form of the phrase *the kingdom of heaven is like*. The parable of the sower in Matthew 13:3-23 does not use that phrase, but that parable can be added to the tally of 10 nonetheless since its phrase “the message about the kingdom” (13:19) indicates the same intent. Therefore we have come to the third of such parables in this Gospel (see also Luke 13:18, 19).

The imagery now shifts from sowing grain to planting *a mustard seed*. The phrase *though it is the smallest of all seeds* is not intended to be a comparison with the seeds of all plants known today. Rather, it reflects the experience of Jesus’ first-century audience. Such a seed measures only one to two millimeters in diameter.

Mustard is a common garden plant in the biblical world. It is grown for its seeds, which can be ground into a powder to add savory flavor to cooked dishes.

What Do You Think?

How has experiencing the fact that God’s work often has humble beginnings affected you? How should it?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In positive situations of church growth, answered prayer, etc.

In negative situations of church conflict, unanswered prayer, etc.

B. To Large Tree (v. 32b, c)

32b. “yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree,

This partial verse reflects the fact that mature mustard plants are large shrubs that can grow as high as 10 or 12 feet. The mustard seed is tiny; the mustard plant is impressively tall. But over time the small, hard-to-see, seemingly insignificant seed grows to

become an exceptionally tall plant. And that is the point about God's inbreaking kingdom that Jesus desires his listeners to understand. Many expect God's kingdom to enter the world suddenly and dramatically (see the Lesson Background), and they must change their thinking.

32c. "so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

The final phrase of the parable underlines the extent of the mustard plant's growth by noting one result. This detail may prompt us to wonder what *the birds* might represent.

In reading Jesus' parables, we generally should first ask not what the details represent but how each detail contributes to the main point(s) of the parable. Clearly, the birds' ability to *perch in its branches* stresses the great size of the plant.

Another theory, however, is that Jesus is drawing a parallel with Ezekiel 17:22-24. The imagery of birds there suggests people of other nations who come to know God. It's possible that Jesus is making the same point: the kingdom of God that he brings, though humble in its beginnings, will fulfill Ezekiel's promise and make people of all nations part of God's people.

III. Parable of the Leaven

(Matthew 13:33)

33. 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."

The third parable of today's lesson makes a point similar to the second. Jesus often delivers units of teaching in pairs in this Gospel (see Matthew 5:13-16; 13:44-46; 24:27, 28). Here the focus is on *yeast* (Luke 13:20, 21 is parallel). This substance is added to flour to make bread dough rise. Another word for yeast is leaven (compare 1 Corinthians 5:6).

As with the mustard seed, the details of the story contrast the smallness of something with its outsized impact or result. The phrasing *mixed into . . . all through the dough* underlines the difficulty (if not impossibility) of being able to see the yeast in such a context. And *sixty pounds of flour* is quite a large amount; when baked into bread, it may feed as many as 100 people.

Yeast is often used in the Bible as a symbol for evil that infiltrates

God's people (Matthew 16:6; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; Galatians 5:9). But it can also be associated with positive actions (Leviticus 7:13; 23:17). As always in interpreting Scripture, we must give due weight to the immediate context. The context at hand suggests a parallel between the growth of a mustard seed and the impact of a small amount of yeast.

It is often noted that this parable depicts the action of a woman, following the action of a man in the story of the mustard seed. Certainly, Jesus is offering every member of his audience the opportunity to connect to his message about God's surprising kingdom. Everyone needs to hear the challenge that God's kingdom will operate almost unnoticed at first, but the end result will be astonishing.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to resist un-Christian temptations of implementing change?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

With regard to changing ethics

With regard to changing morals

With regard to changing definitions (of truth, etc.)

Other

THE BIG IMPACT OF A LITTLE LEAVEN

Molly was a beagle of average intelligence who did a very dumb thing. One morning Jane, her master, mixed up a batch of bread dough and left it on the kitchen table to rise. Then Jane went to the back of the house to do laundry. In Jane's absence, Molly somehow nudged a chair over to the table, hopped up, and gobbled down the entire batch of dough.

When Jane returned to the kitchen, her bread dough was gone! But Molly hadn't gone far. Lying on her back with legs sticking straight up in the air, Molly looked like a bratwurst that had been left on the grill too long! The poor little dog was groaning in agony from the swelling taking place in her tummy.

The small amount of yeast in the dough had created a big crisis within Molly. So an emergency trip to the veterinarian followed. Four hours and \$800 later, Molly was on her way to becoming her old happy self.

Jesus' parable of the yeast describes what just a small portion of the message of his kingdom will do. When that message is received in faith and obedience, an incredible spiritual growth begins to take place. It's not the harmful kind of growth Molly experienced, but the kind that leads to fullness in Christ. The good news is that Jesus' promise of spiritual fullness is still valid.

—C. T.

Conclusion

A. Wait with Patience

None of us likes having to be patient—we just don't like to wait! We all prefer to get what we need immediately. When we are victimized by injustice and evil, we want relief and vindication without delay.

The promise of God's kingdom is that God will certainly bring that relief and vindication. Our holy and just God cannot abide evil and injustice forever. His kingdom promises to defeat the devil and his works, creating "a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13).

But the kingdom of God that Christ establishes does not bring about the defeat of evil all at once. The separation happens not at the beginning but at the end. For now the kingdom operates quietly, almost invisibly, like a tiny seed that grows or like yeast that makes dough rise. As that happens, the Lord calls on people to have ears that hear, to heed his call to turn to him in repentance and receive the blessing of his mercy before it is too late.

If the full reign of God takes longer to occur than his people want, it is only to allow more people the opportunity to become subjects of the kingdom (2 Peter 3:9). Meanwhile, God supplies the strength for his people to wait faithfully, to serve faithfully, and to see the true impact of his seemingly invisible kingdom.

What part of God's future reign do you wish you could experience now? How do you see his kingdom at work as you wait? How has God enabled you to wait with patience? As we reflect on questions like these, we understand what it means to live with ears that hear Jesus' message of God's reign.

B. Prayer

Father, we long for your rule over every part of your world!
Empower us to wait with patience and discernment, knowing that
your kingdom is present among us and will one day be complete.
We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Wait patiently and work prayerfully.

Standard Lesson Commentary NIV (2017-2018).