

THE KINGDOM OF GOD



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THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Quarterly Aim: The Bible student will understand and appreciate the kingdom of God.

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About the Writer



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Jesus Preaches the Gospel of the Kingdom

APPLICATION

To show what message one must believe to be in God's kingdom.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Matthew 4:23-25.

Related Scripture: Matthew 11:5; 24:14, 28:18-20; Mark 1:14; 16:15; Luke 4:18; John 4:39-42; Romans 1:16; 2 Corinthians 10:14; Galatians 1:7-12; Ephesians 1:13; Colossians 1:23; 1 Peter 4:17; Revelation 14:6.

Devotional Reading: The Gospel Proclaimed, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11.

Introduction

Israel's history as a nation began as a people called out by God to leave their Egyptian bondage. God planned for them to travel to the Promised Land to form a nation. When they arrived in their new homeland, the tribes settled into their assigned portions of land. The formation of that nation centered on its faith in God. In fact, the national life of the people of Israel revolved around their worship of Jehovah God. He was the center of national, religious and individual life. They were a theocracy, a land whose leader was God. The time came when the people of Israel were no longer content with that national arrangement. They wanted to be like the nations surrounding them. They wanted a king. It did not matter to them that the King of kings and Lord of lords was their ruler. They wanted someone they could see. When God granted their request, they became a kingdom. Three things are necessary for a nation to be a kingdom. It must have a king, a

people and a place. Israel had a king, Saul. They were the people. They dwelled in a land, Canaan. They were a kingdom.

When Jesus began His earthly preaching ministry, His focus was on preaching the gospel of the kingdom, His kingdom. The people of His day understood the concept of a kingdom. The Israelites had lived as a monarchy for much of their history. Jesus proclaimed the good news about a heavenly kingdom. What did He mean?

One must remember what it takes to form a kingdom: a king, a people and a place. In Christ's spiritual kingdom, these factors were present. The kingdom of Heaven has a king, Jesus Christ; a people, kingdom saints; and a place, the hearts of those who have trusted Jesus. The Jewish hearers looked at themselves as being the fulfillment of the kingdom of God on earth. The problem was that, when the King presented Himself to them, they rejected Him. The kingdom Jesus spoke about was centered in the hearts of those who trusted in and followed Him. This was why He would tell Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). His followers were the citizens of His spiritual kingdom.

The lesson Text relates some of Christ's early preaching about the kingdom of Heaven. This message showed what it takes for an individual to become a citizen of that spiritual kingdom.

1. _____

Jesus Preached a Kingdom of Purpose

"And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom" (Matt. 4:23). This series of messages came not long after the beginning of Christ's ministry. He had submitted to baptism at the hand of John the Baptist in accordance with God's will. He had spent forty days in the wilderness suffering the attacks of Satan (verses 1-11). He had returned to Galilee where He had called out certain men to walk with Him as disciples (verses 18-22). During this time Jesus preached the message, "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (verse 17). Everywhere Jesus went, He proclaimed a similar message. He challenged the people to understand God's will for their lives and to repent of their sins. The gospel of the kingdom is the message needed by all people of all times. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom, He preached a prophetic message. He foretold the time when He would hang on the cross as the sacrifice for sin. This was necessary because every person born into the world is a natural sinner. Jesus is the Son of God and is sinless. All others are sinners and in need of a Savior. Jesus came to take the place of every person. In going to the cross, He took the sins of every person upon Himself. He paid the penalty of sin so that people could be saved. When He preached the gospel, He spoke of the work He would perform as the ultimate sacrifice. He promised salvation to all who would believe.

This same gospel is the means by which people can be saved today. Paul wrote about the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom. 1:16). When people hear this truth, repent of their sins and trust Jesus to save them, they gain eternal life. “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Rom. 10:9). This is the message Jesus preached, and it is the message people need to hear today. He has the keys to His kingdom.

2. _____

Jesus Preached a Kingdom with Power

A king must have power and authority to rule properly. When the people of Israel desired a king, they did not have the right to appoint their own king. They took the matter to God asking Him to select their king. He would not have the right to rule God’s people without His authority. While Jesus was on earth, He proved His authority to rule by exercising the power of the Father. The lesson Text reveals evidence of this power. Jesus came “preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people” (Matt. 4:23). In performing such miracles, Jesus proved His identity as the very Son of God. When Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, he exclaimed, “No man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” (John 3:2). They were evidence of who Jesus was. Four men brought a friend to Jesus for healing. He was unable to walk. When they finally set their friend before Christ, He declared, “Son, thy sins be forgiven thee” (Mark 2:5).

Those who heard the words were confused and angry at what he said. They reasoned within themselves, “Who can forgive sins but God only?” (verse 7). Jesus knew what they thought. He replied, “Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (he saith to the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house” (verses 9-11). The man was immediately healed which gave evidence of Jesus’ power and authority as King of kings.

The power of Christ expressed in that day is the power God has today. He manifests His power differently today. At His ascension, Jesus authorized His churches to do a great work. For a time that authority was manifested in their abilities to perform works like Christ performed. With the completion of the Bible, that power was no longer needed. Now, people and churches have the completed Word of God and should not require the partial things used by the early churches. However, the power of God has not diminished. He still works in the lives of His people. He has authorized and equipped His churches to reach out to the world. His is a kingdom with power. His power remains the same.

3. _____

Jesus Preached a Kingdom with Priorities

The message Jesus preached concerning the kingdom of Heaven had an impact. People showed change in their lives and behavior. “And there followed him great multitudes of people” (Matt. 4:25). This word *followed* presented the thought of walking on the same road. It spoke of a person who had chosen to accompany another, especially as a disciple. The message impacted the lives of those individuals. They determined to walk with Christ wherever He would go. They were His disciples.

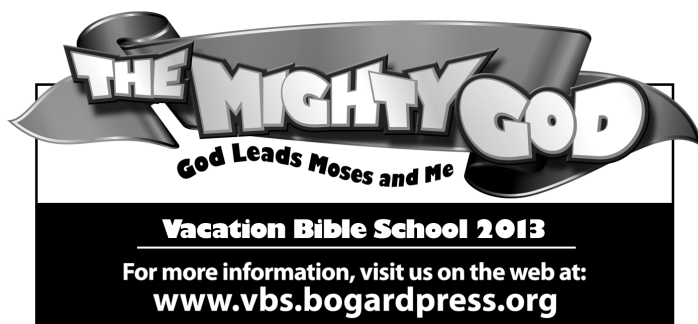
God wants to reign in the lives of His people. He is not content with merely having them make a public confession. Sometimes people will make a public profession of their decision to follow Christ. They might do right for a brief time, but then slip back into their old life-styles. Such conduct is not really following the Lord. It is only a temporary diversion. Being in the kingdom of God means letting Him have control of our lives. Since Jesus is

the King of kings, He has the right to rule you. He went to the cross and paid the price for your sins. If you have trusted in Him as Savior, then He has given you eternal life. You are bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:20). Because this is true, He has the right to govern how your life is lived. Life should always be lived to the honor and glory of Christ. He is worthy of such praise and His glory should be our priority.

Churches function as the kingdom of God on earth. They have a commission from the commander. They are to go into the world with the gospel so that people can hear and be saved. That work should be their priority. If a church and its members are not obeying their marching orders, then they are failing the kingdom's work. Churches and individuals will give an account as to how they obeyed the Lord. We should let His priorities become our own.

Conclusion

The kingdom of Heaven is the functioning arm of the Savior on earth. The kingdom of God in Heaven follows perfectly the will of God. Jesus taught His disciples to pray that God's will be accomplished on earth as certainly as it is in Heaven (Matt. 6:10). This will only happen when we realize our place and our function within the kingdom of Heaven. The King of kings has given His orders. Will we obey His demands?



Jesus Qualifies Those in His Kingdom

APPLICATION

To show that being religious is not the same as being saved.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Matthew 7:21-27.

Related Scripture: Matthew 23; 24:5, 24; John 6:60, 66; Acts 20:30; Romans 2:17-29; 2 Thessalonians 2:7-11; 1 Timothy 1:3-7, 18-20; 4:1, 2; Titus 1:10-14; 1 John 2:19.

Devotional Reading: The Pharisees Were Religious, Matthew 5:20.

Introduction

The kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom, one born in the hearts of those who trust in Jesus as Savior. Some people think that as long as they are religious, they are part of His kingdom. Many religious organizations claim to represent the living God. Some hold a Bible in their hands but manipulate its words to fit their purpose. Paul warned about such teachers. The time would come “when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears” (2 Tim. 4:3). Things are no different than they were in Paul’s day. Religious organizations still preach the words people want to hear, and vast throngs of people flock to hear those pleasing messages. Just because a group calls itself a church does not mean it is recognized as such by God.

Because of these false preachers, and because of people’s natural desire for something pleasing, many have fooled themselves into thinking they are the children of God and part

of the kingdom of God. They believe because they are religious, they automatically qualify as citizens of that heavenly place. Jesus spoke about these people in the lesson Text. God sets the criteria by which a person is saved. Salvation is not a matter of religion but it is a matter of repentance and faith. His words on this matter are important for people to understand.

1. _____

Religious Talk Is Not Kingdom Belief

Religion is most often viewed as a plan by which a person can gain access to Heaven. People want to cover all bases, so they will accept a little religion into their lives for the purpose of taking care of the future. Most have no real desire for spiritual change. They just want to assure themselves of a place in Heaven. As a result, most religions are places people go to soothe their consciences with religious talk. Jesus was clear in teaching that mere religious talk and religious claims are not the same as actually possessing a relationship with God.

Jesus began His discussion on this matter by declaring, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). Today’s mind-set is to think if a person is religious, then that individual must be a Christian and must be saved. Such an attitude is in disagreement with what the Lord said. Just because a person spouts out religious phrases does not mean that individual has truly been saved. On another occasion, Jesus spoke of the time when “whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service” (John 16:2). This came true just a short time later. Not long after the Lord’s ascension, His disciples became faithful and bold in preaching the gospel. Some people grew angry over their message. Saul of Tarsus was one of these men. He was so angry with those who believed in Jesus that he traveled far to arrest them. He was religiously zealous. He would do anything he could to advance his religion while destroying another. He did not engage in such behavior only because he did not like the believers in Jesus. He did it for his religious beliefs. Was his conduct good and godly? No, but Saul thought he was doing the right thing.

Being religious might make a person better, but it is not sufficient to produce a relationship with God. Merely using the

name of God or the Lord will not wash away sins. It takes more. A person must repent of sins and trust Jesus as Savior. This is the will of God. He is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Religious talk is not enough.

2. _____

Religious Activities Are Not Kingdom Work (Matthew 7:22)

Some people will admit that merely talking religion is not enough. They engage in religious activities to gain favor with God. The problem with this philosophy is that people do not have the ability to do totally selfless and godly acts. The prophet Isaiah described the natural behavior of humanity in scathing terms. “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away” (Isa. 64:6). Even the best deeds people perform are nothing but filthiness in the eyes of God. Like a leaf withers when removed from the tree, so people’s works are blown away when they are separated from God. The sin nature within each individual disables the ability to perform truly good deeds. Sin prevails.

If good works cannot draw a person into a right relationship with God, then why should believers bother to try? Good works are a manifestation of what God has done on the inside. He saved the soul, and the individual has become the child of God. This transaction should produce an outward expression of the inner change. Because the believer is a new creation in Christ, the actions of that person should reflect what has happened. Good works come because people are saved, not to produce salvation.

The lesson Text describes what most people would think of as religious activities. Some had prophesied, or preached in the name of Christ. Others had cast out demons in His name. Still others had done many marvelous and impressive deeds in Christ’s name. Since salvation is “not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:9), these religious activities could never give eternal life. If good works provided salvation, then Jesus died on the cross for no purpose. His death would have been unnecessary if people could work their way to Heaven. But salvation could never be produced by the works of sinful people. It took the sacrifice of the perfect Savior to pay the price for sin.

3. _____

Religious People May Not Be Kingdom Saints

Can the good works of any person produce a relationship with the Savior? When Jesus gave this message to the listeners, He issued a stern warning. “Then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matt. 7:23). Though some people think they have gained acceptance by God through their religion, when they stand before the righteous Judge, they will be condemned because they never trusted Jesus as their Savior. God did not declare that He had known them but forgotten about them. They had never come to Him for salvation. They never had a relationship with Him. Now, their judgment had come.

Facing God’s judgment and condemnation is a frightful prospect. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31). Christ sitting on the Great White Throne will be such a dreadful sight that the earth and heavens will flee from Him (Rev. 20:11). Those standing in judgment there will only have the prospect of eternal separation from God in the lake of fire. They rejected the gift of eternal life while on earth, and now, they will suffer the consequences. They will have no second chance to be saved. It will be too late.

The only way to escape the Great White Throne Judgment is to make preparation today. People must realize their sinful, helpless condition. Only God can change a person from sinfulness into righteousness. The individual must repent and trust in Christ. Only then will the believer be granted eternal life. All others have rejected God’s gift of grace. They will depart from the presence of God for all eternity.

4. _____

Religious Groups Might Build on the Sand (Matthew 7:24-27)

Jesus gave a parable of the value of building one’s eternity on the proper foundation. People have only two options about their eternal foundation. The illustration Christ gave was of building a house without first laying a firm foundation. The builder just went to a beautiful sight and started building. The finished house looked stable and secure. Then, the stormy season came around. The winds blew and the waters washed at the foundation. The sand was easily moved and the house fell because it had

no real foundation. Jesus said this was like those who tried to base eternity on earthly matters. They might be religious, but they have no real, lasting, firm foundation for life or eternity. When the fall comes (and it will come), it will be terrible. A sandy foundation is no foundation at all.

The other kind of foundation was a builder digging deeply to lay a firm foundation. When the house was completed, it was beautiful, stable and secure. When the stormy season came and the winds and waters began to strike the house, it stood firm because it had a good foundation. This is compared to those who plan for eternity by placing their faith in Jesus. They will perform good works and seek to help others, but their activities are not for the purpose of deserving eternal life. Instead, they work because they know they are saved. They want to show the love of God to the world. Those who trust Jesus as Savior have the needed foundation.

Conclusion

Life is important. The choices we make in life are equally important. We can choose to be religious and nothing else. That will provide no foundation for eternity. Being religious is no substitute for trusting Jesus as Savior. Many religions instruct their followers to perform works and religious activities to earn or complete their salvation. They are building on a foundation that will not last. Only one foundation will help. That foundation is Jesus Christ. “For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11). Where is your foundation?

Jesus Commands Others To Preach the Kingdom Message

APPLICATION

To show that Jesus commands His followers to preach the kingdom.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Matthew 10:5-15.

Related Scripture: Mark 1:14, 15; 3:14; Luke 3:15-18; 4:43; 9:60; Acts 8:12, 13; 10:34-43; 11:20; 13:5; 17:13; 28:31; 2 Corinthians 11:7; Galatians 1:16; Hebrews 4:6.

Devotional Reading: Adversity May Stimulate Preaching, Acts 8:1-8.

Introduction

The previous lessons have demonstrated Jesus' priority to preach the message of the kingdom of Heaven. This ministry was more important to Him than food or rest (John 4:34). But He did not expect to do everything Himself. He called others into the work of sharing the gospel. He wanted His disciples to continue His outreach. As Jesus prepared to ascend to the Father, He issued the marching orders for His churches. "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations" (Matt. 28:19). The word *teach* in this verse presents the thought of creating followers. Churches must reach out with the gospel of the kingdom so that people can be saved and won to service in the King's army. The early church followed His commands by reaching out to their world. Such men as Paul, Barnabas and Silas traveled throughout the Roman empire with the intent of reaching people for Christ. In many cities people were saved, baptized and a church established. God's work

advanced because they followed Christ's command to preach the gospel.

The work of the Lord continues even today. Churches and their members have the responsibility to reach out to people both at home and abroad. They must go where the people are to help them know about salvation. This is why men surrender to the call to go to distant lands with the gospel. This is why churches enlist and authorize missionaries to do their work. They are following the commands of the Lord. But the work of the Lord is more than just reaching out to distant lands. It is also realizing that everyone is in need of a Savior. Churches and their members must recognize the need in their communities. They must seek to touch people in such a way that they will recognize the love of the Savior and yield to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

1. _____ **The Place (Matthew 10:5, 6)**

The command of the Lord began with the demand to go. The commission He would soon give them would instruct them to go into all the world. But in this set of commands, Jesus had some restrictions for them. First, they were told where not to go. Then, they were instructed to whom they were to preach. They were not to travel to Gentile or Samaritan cities at that time. Why did the Lord not allow them to travel outside the Jewish land? Since their initial outreach was to be toward the Jewish people, any long contact with Gentiles or Samaritans would make their message unacceptable. The Jews were proud of their heritage. They felt any contact with other people would defile them. At that time, Jesus' focus was on reaching His own people. The day would come when that outreach would be expanded. The disciples were to begin where they were before trying to reach the world.

The Lord is careful and specific in His instructions. He knew what was best. When the Jews rejected Him as their Messiah, it was time to go further. "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). One might notice how extensively Jesus increased the vision of the churches. Before this command, He had told the disciples to restrict their preaching to the lost of Israel. Cities within their borders were

appropriate places to preach. Now, the mission increased. They were to reach every corner of the world. This is where churches stand today. They are to work at home seeking the salvation of those in the community. They are to help in the outreach to their home nation. But they are not to stop there. They must reach the entire world with God's message. The place of God's work today has expanded. God's people and churches must obey the command of the Lord.

2. _____ **The Preaching (Matthew 10:7)**

Not only did the Lord give clear instructions on where His disciples were to perform their work, but He also declared what they were to preach. "As ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (verse 7). This was the message Jesus had begun His ministry preaching. This was what the people needed in that day, and it is what people still need today. They must hear the message of the gospel.

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth defining what the gospel was and what it could accomplish (1 Cor. 15:1-4). It is the death, burial and resurrection of the Savior as prophesied in Old Testament Scriptures and as reported in New Testament history. Dying on the cross paid the price of sin. Rising from death provided the power for salvation proving that Jesus is the Son of God with power (Rom. 1:4). This is the gospel in a nutshell. The gospel is "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth" (verse 16). This is the gospel people need to hear. Far too many religions have begun preaching a social gospel. The only way to heal the ills of humanity is through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Instead, they preach another gospel. Paul warned about this kind of preaching. "If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:9). To be accursed is to gain ultimate disapproval from God. He will never be pleased when someone turns from His truth. People need to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes people in churches grow content in their service because they faithfully support missionaries. The gospel must be preached at home as well as abroad. The person across the street needs Jesus just as certainly as the person in a distant land who has never heard the gospel. The person across the street is

someone we can reach. God's command is clear. The place of our service to Him is right where we are. Will we obey His command?

3. _____ **The Priority (Matthew 10:9-13)**

The Lord was concerned about the daily care of His disciples. As they went from place to place, God would go before them preparing the hearts of the people both to receive them and their message. When someone offered to care for them as they ministered in a town, they would accept the gracious gift until it was time to depart. This was a blessing from God both to the receiver and giver. A missionary once said that to refuse a gift from someone was to deprive him of a blessing. When a church member opens his door to a missionary to stay for a time, both the missionary and the provider are blessed from God. This is the way God often works.

What was the benefit from such an arrangement? As the disciples went from place to place, they were required to trust God for their future provisions. They learned the lesson of dependence. Far too many people are independent, thinking they can make it fine without help from anyone. Such an attitude is selfish and sinful. God wants people to depend on Him. He is the enabler and supplier. Paul wrote to the church at Philippi concerning their financial support of his work. His dependence was not on the church at Philippi. His dependence was on God. He declared, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13). He then described how God had brought so many blessings into his life. Blessings will always come from God. "But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (verse 19). God's people should always remember that "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father" (James 1:17). Christ's priority in this commission was to teach His disciples dependence on the Father.

4. _____ **The Possibility (Matthew 10:14, 15)**

Often when people determine to become engaged in the work of God, they assume they will always be successful. Such an assumption is simply not true. People will often reject God's message. Isaiah was called by God to preach to the people of Jerusalem. He was willing to do whatever the Lord wanted. God

warned that people would not readily accept his message. Isaiah was to “go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not” (Isa. 6:9). That was not encouraging news, but God’s message was clear. Whether or not people responded, Isaiah was to preach.

Not everyone who hears the gospel of salvation will respond to the message. That is not in the hands of the messenger. God is responsible for the results. God’s people are simply to speak His message. No one should be discouraged when results are not what were expected. One preacher lamented that for twenty-eight months the church had not seen one soul saved. Such a spiritual drought was difficult. But during that time, many seeds were being sown. In a following brief period, dozens of people came to know Christ and were baptized into the fellowship of the church. We might plant, another water, but God “giveth the increase” (1 Cor. 3:7).

Conclusion

God’s purpose for His people is for them to preach the gospel of the kingdom. Wherever people are located, they need the gospel. The commission was not given to some board, some committee or some society. It was given to churches. The members of churches must become engaged in the work. Someone has said, “If we don’t go, they won’t know!” Jesus encouraged His disciples to do this work diligently. The call is clear today. God’s people must engage in God’s work and do it God’s way. If they do, then God’s results will follow. When we obey the Lord, He will certainly bless.

Jesus' Kingdom Includes His Church

APPLICATION

To show the importance of New Testament churches to Jesus.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Matthew 11:7-19.

Related Scripture: Romans 11:36; 16:25-27; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3; Galatians 1:5; Ephesians 1:1-12; 2:10-22; 3:10-21; 1 Timothy 1:17; 2 Timothy 4:18; Hebrews 13:21; 1 Peter 5:1-11; 2 Peter 3:18.

Devotional Reading: Churches Are To Glorify Jesus, Ephesians 3:21.

Introduction

Jesus founded His church during His earthly ministry. It is the institution He has authorized to carry out His kingdom work on earth. One should remember what a kingdom is. A kingdom speaks of the king's domain, that which is under the sovereign authority of a ruler. Since Jesus established this institution, He can delegate authority to it. This is exactly what He did in giving the Great Commission to His churches. "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:18-20). They were given strict instructions about their work. His churches are to fulfill kingdom outreach in the world today.

In His commission, Jesus promised to be with His churches even though He was physically leaving them. He gave them the authority, and soon they would have the ability to do His work.

They were empowered when the Holy Spirit came upon the church on the day of Pentecost. Now, they could go out and do what He had commanded them. The promise of His presence also gave assurance that they would not be ultimately destroyed. The Lord had assured them that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). How was this proven true? When persecution came upon the church after Christ’s ascension, Jesus came to one of the persecutors and said, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” (Acts 9:4). He identified with His suffering followers. Far too many people do not realize how much the Lord loves His churches. Paul spoke of this great love when he said that the Lord had “purchased [His churches] with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). If people realized His great love for His churches, then they might love it more. One person said, “We have too many soldiers of the kind we have.” By this he meant that too many people are not really committed to following the Lord. They might serve God if nothing else conflicts. But if something else presents the opportunity, then God must take the backseat. God deserves the best people can give.

The focus of this lesson is to show God’s people how important New Testament churches really are. They are not social clubs where we meet with our friends. They are not welfare institutions whose sole purpose is to pay for groceries, gas or utilities. When we are absent from our church and its ministry, then we are saying it holds no real value. God views it differently. Maybe God’s people need to take a second look at the importance of the Lord’s churches.

1. _____

Jesus Honored John the Baptist (Matthew 7:7-10)

John the Baptist was an interesting character in God’s work. The Old Testament foretold of one who would come to “prepare ye the way of the LORD” (Isa. 40:3). Before the Lord’s Messiah would begin His earthly ministry, one would set the stage for His appearance. His work would be similar to that of Elijah (Malachi 4:5). The lesson Text pointed to this aspect of John’s work (Matt. 11:14). John faithfully pointed people to Christ. When asked if he were the Messiah, John responded, “I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him” (John 3:28). When Jesus came for His baptism, John testified of His character when he declared,

“Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). His function was to point people to Jesus, and John faithfully fulfilled that purpose.

As Jesus spoke of John the Baptist, his purpose and his character, He showed the high esteem He held for this servant of God. John had drawn a following because of his unique image and message. To some people, he was the latest religious fad to follow. But when they went out to him, John showed his displeasure with such a shallow commitment. He challenged the people to bring evidence of their faith in God. Some were offended because he would not accept their outward allegiance. John wanted them fully engaged with God. He wanted them to have a real relationship with their Creator. Some people accepted his message while others rejected it. But John was faithful to the work God had called him to perform.

Jesus declared no other person exceeded John in value to God. He was greater in purpose and commitment than all others. The Lord said, “Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist” (Matt. 11:11).

2. _____

Jesus Honored His Church (Matthew 7:11)

When Jesus spoke of the greatness of John the Baptist, He also declared the importance and value He placed on each member of His New Testament churches (verse 11). This is something people need to understand today. The Lord still places great value on His people.

Sometimes people do not consider their value to the Lord and His work. They think they have few if any talents, little if any ability; therefore, they see no real worth in their work for the Savior. Such an attitude is belittling to God. He saved their souls and made them children of the King. Whatever their opinion might be, they are in an important position. They simply need to understand what God wants from them. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Your spiritual character and worth to God was fixed by the Lord when He saved your soul. His purpose for your life is that of doing good works. That is His divine and predetermined purpose for your life. When you refuse to follow His directions, you are saying that He was mistaken in what He intended for

your life. Isaiah spoke of Israel as the potter's clay, "Shall the work say of him that made it, He made me not?" (Isa. 29:16). It would be folly for a clay pot to think it had formed itself. It is folly for God's people to think God knew nothing when He saved them. God's purpose should be fulfilled by His people. They need to remember His love toward them.

3. _____

Jesus Warned His Church (Matthew 7:12)

The Lord prepared His followers for what might come. He knew the days were swiftly approaching when they would endure hardship because of their faith. Here, He used John the Baptist as an object lesson as to what would happen to them. John was in Herod's prison. He had been arrested because Herod feared he might stir up political revolt against him. His message caused his imprisonment. Jesus used this fact to remind His disciples of what the future held. They would face persecution because of their beliefs.

Churches down through time have faced times of great persecution. Whenever they were in the minority, the government or prevailing religion would bring troubles to them. The book of Acts reveals many times when those who believed in Jesus faced hardships. Such times did not cause them to deny their faith. On one occasion, John and Peter were beaten because they kept preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. When released, they departed "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name" (Acts 5:41). Countless others have faced similar fates. During the Dark Ages, an estimated fifty million Christians were killed for refusing to deny their faith in Jesus. What would happen today if such a danger existed in the United States? Would churches be full or abandoned? Many places in the world face such a prospect. God's people in safe lands should be aware of what is going on and pray for saints in other lands who face danger. We should pray that God would give us the courage to stand for Christ no matter what the opposition might be.

4. _____

Jesus Warned of People's Reaction to the Gospel (Matthew 7:15-17)

The Lord wanted people to hear and respond to the message presented. "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Matt. 11:15).

Many times people go out of church thinking, “How could anyone not respond to the gospel presentation in the sermon?” But they go on their way without making any real change in their lives. Many times people think the message presented is for someone else, not them. Jesus wants everyone to hear and respond to the message.

Sometimes people are simply not happy with how things are going in church. It really does not matter how things are done, they think it is wrong. This is in agreement with the warning Jesus gave. He said wedding music had been played, and the people did not rejoice. Then funeral music was played, and they did not mourn. Whatever was done was wrong. God’s people must stop being so self-centered. The work of a church is not to satisfy a person’s selfish desires. The church is to reach the world for Christ. Members should look at the work of their church and see how they can make it better. Then they will rejoice at the right time and mourn at the right time.

Conclusion

Christ greatly loves and values His churches. He gave His all that churches might have the opportunity and the ability to reach the world. His priority for His churches is evident in Scripture (Acts 9:4). That is not in question. The problem lies in church members. What value do we place on our churches? I should look at my church as the greatest church that exists. If I fail in this, I am belittling the body of Christ. May God help us realize what He thinks about church so that we might place higher esteem on it.

Jesus Preaches About Two Kingdoms

APPLICATION

To show that the kingdom of God is of the Lord.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Matthew 12:22-37.

Related Scripture: Matthew 13:38; Mark 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-36; 11:17-26; 22:53; John 8:44; Acts 13:10; Ephesians 2:2; Colossians 1:13; 1 Timothy 5:15; 2 Timothy 2:26; 1 John 3:8.

Devotional Reading: Satan's Kingdom, Ephesians 6:12.

Introduction

The world is composed of many nations. Often two or more nations cannot get along. One country will want one thing while another will want the exact opposite. When such conflicting desires meet, a battle is the usual result. Nation fights nation because they cannot agree. Jesus warned that such events would foreshadow His return to earth (Matt. 24:7). These battles have their beginning in the sinful nature of the human heart. But when did that sinful nature begin?

When Adam and Eve transgressed God's commandment in the Garden of Eden, they plunged themselves and the human race into the state of sin. God was not content to allow humanity to remain in that state without hope. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to become the sacrifice for sin. People can have eternal life when they trust Jesus as their Savior. The problem is that the devil is not happy when people receive Jesus and His gift

of eternal life. Satan battles to defeat the purpose of God. This means two kingdoms are in a constant state of war.

The kingdom of God is the focus of these lessons. That is where He reigns and has sovereign control. But on earth, Satan also wants to reign. He wants people to follow him, so, he fights to defeat the kingdom of God. The Bible speaks of his great power and terrible influence. He is called “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2) and “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4). He has people on earth to serve as his ministers. They preach a gospel, but it is different from the one presented by God. Satan’s preachers claim to be of the Light, but are in reality darkness. Their gospel is perverted and will draw people away from Christ (Gal. 1:6, 7). Those who preach this perverted gospel deserve condemnation from God (verses 8, 9).

The Lord warned about presenting the wrong message. He spoke of two kingdoms which are in constant battle. The people of His day thought His message to be strange. People today make the same mistake. All should heed what Jesus said about the two kingdoms.

1. _____ **The Demonstration of Kingdom Power (Matthew 12:22, 23)**

Each kingdom has power and authority. The kingdom of God has its own kind of power and authority. While Jesus was on the earth, He was willing to demonstrate the power of God. On this occasion, Jesus had demonstrated God’s power by healing a man who had been afflicted by demon spirits. This man was unable to talk or see. Jesus could do what no man could do. He had power to help this man who was hurting. The cure did not come over the process of time. Instead, when Jesus exercised God’s power, the man could immediately speak and see. When the people saw this demonstration, they were astounded and cried out, “Is not this the son of David?” (Matt. 12:23). They were convinced that the kingdom of God was at hand. When they proclaimed Jesus as the Son of David, they were assigning to Him the office of the Christ. God’s kingdom had manifested itself to them and the rightful King, the son of David, was ready to ascend to the throne. The demonstration of kingdom power convinced the common people.

The kingdom of God still has great power and authority. The application of that power and authority is manifested differently today. The age where church members can perform miracles is

completed. God's power has not changed, but His method of manifesting that power is different. No mere mortal can perform miraculous deeds today. Instead, the power of God is displayed when churches go into the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:18-20). The Lord is willing and able to help churches as they fulfill their commission on earth. The kingdom of God still demonstrates His power in this glorious work.

2. _____

The Denial of Kingdom Power (Matthew 12:24)

The Pharisees, those men who were captivated by their own importance, were always careful to defend their political position in Jerusalem. They felt no others had any authority. When Jesus healed the blind and dumb man, they were watching. They heard the people declare Jesus to be the Son of David. Such a claim would be a threat to their position. They could not stand for anyone taking their place, so they began their attack.

The Pharisees could not deny that the man had been healed. The act had been witnessed by many people. They tried to lessen the value of the healing with a sarcastic accusation. "This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils" (Matt. 12:24). Beelzebub was the ancient name of the idolatrous god of Ekron (2 Kings 1:2). Israel used the name to refer to Satan and opposition to God. The name in the Old Testament meant "the god of flies." The Pharisees tried to belittle the work of Christ by saying it was not done by God, but by the lord of flies. This would equate Jesus to the degrading idol whose image was akin to a human with wings like a fly's wings.

People still want to belittle the work of the Savior. When a person is saved, people think the individual has been fooled or moved by emotion. They will not admit that God can actually produce a change in someone's life. People would rather continue in evil than turn to the Lord in repentance and faith. Though not openly stating their opposition, they are denying the power of God as He works in the hearts of people today.

3. _____

The Danger of Denying Kingdom Power (Matthew 12:25-32)

When the Pharisees cast their accusation against Christ, He was ready with an answer. The Lord showed the danger of what

they had said. The work He had performed in healing the blind and dumb man was accomplished by the power of God. They had ascribed the work to the power of Satan. This was a dangerous statement. It was also a foolish argument.

If the man was possessed by a demon, what benefit would Satan have for casting out one of his own demons? This would be like an army shooting and killing its own soldiers. Such an army is doomed to defeat. If Satan acted so foolishly, his kingdom would quickly fall. Satan is certainly evil, but he is not foolish. He makes subtle and crafty decisions. Fighting against self is not what Satan will do.

These men went beyond mere foolishness. They offered a dangerous argument. Giving Satan glory for what God has done is blasphemy. A person denying the power of God or assigning to Satan the glory due to God stands in danger of the ultimate judgment. Such a person would not make this kind of declaration except from a heart totally devoid of concern for God. Blasphemy demeans God and drags a person further away from Him. A person declares his total opposition to God. He denies that God can and will save. That individual chooses to reject the only way of salvation. He is claiming condemnation rather than forgiveness.

Everybody should be careful what he says. Sometimes people utter things without forethought. The words just come out. Sometimes these words are totally opposite of what should be said. When it comes to God, we must be careful to give Him the glory He is due.

4. _____

The Declaration of Judgment (Matthew 12:33-37)

In judging the accusations of these self-righteous Pharisees, Jesus warned that a greater judgment was coming. The results of that future judgment are eternal. But the basis of that judgment is determined while a person is on earth. It comes down to a matter of the heart.

Jesus gave an illustration showing the difference between the heart evidenced by the Pharisees and a heart which has faith in God. The illustration was of a tree. A tree will either produce good or bad fruit. The good fruit presents the idea of fruit that is beautiful and desirable. The bad fruit (called “corrupt” in the

Text) is rotten and distasteful. Who would go to a fruit tree and pick the fruit that was lying on the ground, rotten and infested with worms? No one would choose the bad fruit. Instead, people go to the fruit still on the branches in which the color is beautiful and the skin unbroken. That is good fruit. Jesus said people's hearts are like that. If they have rejected God's gift, their hearts are rotten and corrupt. If they have received Jesus as Savior, their hearts are beautiful and good. The choice is the individual's to make.

People often want to ignore the reality of coming judgment. That kind of prospect is frightening. Jesus assured that judgment was coming and each person will give an account of how he has lived. The judgment will not be composed solely of religious activities. Jesus warned, "Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment" (Matt. 12:36). Nothing will be hidden in that day.

Conclusion

Two kingdoms are constantly in battle. The war rages in the heart of every person. One army is Satan and his evil cohorts. The other army is our Savior. Jesus loves people so much He was willing to give His life as the ransom for sin. Satan hates people so much he endeavors to trick everyone into an eternity in hell. Which of these two armies offers the best prospect? Life or death? Moses made a special proposition to the people of Israel. The same offer comes to us today. "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live" (Deut. 30:19). What is your choice concerning Christ?

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Jesus Speaks of Kingdom Truth

APPLICATION

To show that some are unwilling to hear truth.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Matthew 13:10-17.

Related Scripture: John 1:11, 12; 5:39; 10:6-14; Acts 14:21, 22; 17:10-12; Ephesians 4:14, 15; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Hebrews 4:1-6; 1 Peter 1:10-12; 2:2, 3; 3:18.

Devotional Reading: Steps to Spiritual Growth, Luke 19:11-26.

Introduction

During His earthly ministry, Jesus often taught with parables. A parable is a short, simple story designed to teach a spiritual truth. The story would be familiar to the listeners and they could easily relate to what was said. Jesus used the parables to draw people closer to the truth. He wanted everyone to understand his need in relation to God. Sometimes those illustrations were real-life events. Other times, He could simply have been relaying a general story which taught a principle or truth. Every time Jesus spoke a parable, He always presented a truth so that those who really listened could perceive the will of God and be challenged to live for Him.

Some people look at truth as being obscure or uncertain. Pilate held that attitude. Jesus had been brought before him for condemnation. Pilate spoke with Jesus seeking to determine what charge might be leveled against Him. Maybe He was a revolutionary. Pilate asked, "Art thou a king then?" (John 18:37). Jesus did not have the purpose of usurping the authority of the

Roman empire. He responded, “Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice” (verse 37). Pilate could barely believe what he heard. He thought that the one in power determined what was truth. He arrogantly responded to the statement of Christ, “What is truth?” (verse 38). He did not realize that Jesus had been preaching the truth His entire ministry.

Truth is just as certain and definite today as in the day of Christ. Some people and some religions like to present a mixture of truth and error by including some of the world in the Christian walk. This cannot be. Just a little error makes truth into a lie. Truth and falsehood are mutually exclusive. People must embrace the true and reject the false (1 Peter 3:11). When Jesus preached, He presented the complete truth. This lesson will focus on that presentation of kingdom truth.

1. _____ **The Reason for Parables on
Kingdom Truth (Matthew 13:10-12)**

One day Jesus had been teaching with parables when His disciples asked, “Why speakest thou unto them in parables?” (Matt. 13:10). In essence, they wondered why Jesus used illustrations when He could plainly speak. What was His motivation in preaching through parables?

Sometimes, people require a simple message. When talking with children, plain words and easy illustrations can get a point across quicker than using adult words and difficult concepts. The people to whom Jesus spoke were adults in body, but babies in spiritual matters. They had difficulty accepting what was said. Jesus did not change His message. He merely changed the way He presented it to the people.

Preaching by parables showed which of the listeners were really interested in what Christ preached. Those who wanted to know what Jesus said could take these parables and learn. Then, they could ask further questions to grow in their understanding and faith. The message presented by the Lord was not difficult, but it was different. He wanted followers who came not merely because of the miracles and blessings. He wanted people to desire to know the truth.

Those who came with the desire to know the truth would be blessed for their effort. They would come with a little

understanding, but would gain a greater knowledge because they desired to know Him (verse 12). This is where people should be today. They should have a desire to know Him better. Then, their lives can have a greater impact on those around them.

2. _____ **The Restriction to Kingdom Truth
(Matthew 13:13-15)**

Jesus knew His message would be controversial to some people. He did not want people to follow Him because of the sensational things happening around Him. He wanted them to follow because they believed in Him. The disciples were people who really wanted to know Him better.

The vast majority of those who came out to hear Jesus only wanted to see what would happen next. The parables raised questions in their hearts and minds, and left many questions. Only those who desired the closer walk with God pursued it further. The remainder saw and heard, but did not really understand the message (verse 13). This was because they had closed their spiritual eyes and ears and did not accept the truth Jesus presented. It was not that they could not receive it. Instead, they simply refused to go deeper with God. They were content in their meager faith.

How many people today want religion without commitment, preaching without challenge and church without sacrifice? They enjoy coming and hearing interesting stories and funny words, but they do not want to leave their comfort zones. Church to them is a Sunday morning experience, and they do not want to go any further. They would have fit in nicely with the majority of those who came out to hear Jesus preach. They would have listened to those cute stories and gone their ways without any change in heart or life. And Christ would be just as displeased with them as those of His day. The Lord wants everybody to desire to know Him better and to be more fully committed to His work. People must listen and apply the truths of God to life.

3. _____ **The Rejoicing in Knowing Kingdom
Truth (Matthew 13:16, 17)**

“But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear” (Matt. 13:16). The word given as *blessed* has the thought of a person who is happy because he is fortunate. The word is often applied to God indicating He is to be honored and exalted.

The person who responds to Jesus' message has joy in life and will be exalted by God in time to come. Being part of God's work is a special blessing. It increases one's expectation for the future. Knowing a person's life is pleasing to God will cause that individual to have "joy unspeakable and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8).

The work of Christ in presenting kingdom truth was anticipated by Old Testament saints. The saints from that era desired to see the Messiah. They did not live to see His day, but those to whom He spoke had the blessing of hearing the Messiah preach. They saw the mighty hand of God as it worked wondrous miracles. They were truly blessed and could rejoice over their opportunity.

People today might not have the opportunity to physically see Christ today. They do have the complete message God intended people to possess. They have the Bible and its presentation of kingdom truth. They should rejoice over the wonderful privilege they have been granted.

Conclusion

Truth remains the same in all generations. The writer of Hebrews offered a great testimony of our unchanging Savior and God. "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever" (Heb. 13:8). Whenever you go in time, Jesus will remain the same. His message will not change. This truth was also presented in the Old Testament. "For I am the LORD, I change not" (Malachi 3:6). What does this mean for the children of God? They do not have to worry whether the Lord will change His mind about grace, faith and salvation. It will remain the same. He will not alter His promises. They are steadfast and sure. He will literally and physically return just as He said. It is His promise and it will not change.

Truth cannot change at any time or it was not truth to begin with. When Jesus presented His truth by means of parables, He wanted His followers to embrace what He taught. He wanted others to have the opportunity to come to Him in faith, but so many only wanted physical blessings, not spiritual truth. Kingdom truth was offered to the listeners, but most rejected it. They did not take the challenge presented. What about people today? The same truth is given in the Word of God. Will you accept what Christ has said or will you walk away? The choice is yours to make. What will you do?

Jesus' Kingdom Has Babies and Mature Saints

APPLICATION

To show that there are various stages of spiritual growth.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.

Related Scripture: Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:13-20; Romans 16:17-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; 2 Corinthians 5:9-12; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Thessalonians 1:3-8; 2 Thessalonians 1:4, 5; 2 Timothy 2:15; Hebrews 5:11-14; 1 Peter 2:1-5.

Devotional Reading: The Source of Spiritual Growth, Acts 18:24-28.

Introduction

When the Lord described to Nicodemus what takes place in salvation, He declared, “Ye must be born again” (John 3:7). His description was appropriate. When babies are physically born into the world, they are completely helpless. They need the strength, guidance and help of their parents. Babies must begin with the basics and then grow from that point. They cannot begin life by eating steaks. They begin with milk. This will provide them the nutrients needed for them to grow stronger.

The growth of babies into mature adults is a picture of what takes place in the lives of believers as the born-again children of God. They are spiritually immature when they are saved. They must have spiritual milk. This nourishment comes through the Bible. It is the food they need to gain spiritual strength and become mature adults in the work of the Lord. The writer of Hebrews spoke of people who were saved but had not grown as they should (Heb. 5:12). Rather than receiving the nourishment

the Bible can give, they remained babies in God's work. The problem with spiritual immaturity is that it can cause great division within a church. The church at Corinth faced such a situation. It was a divided church with schisms and cliques within the congregation. The root cause of this division was the church members' immaturity. They remained babies in Christ and were carnally (fleshly, worldly) minded (1 Cor. 3:3). They had not grown up spiritually and could only act like selfish children.

This kind of problem arises in churches even today. People trust Jesus as Savior and become members of a church. They have the opportunity to receive biblical nourishment but refuse to take advantage of their blessing. They remain babies in Christ. Then, they wonder why troubles always arise in church. It is partly because these immature Christians are selfishly seeking their own way rather than the way of peace and unity. God's people should take advantage of their opportunity for personal, spiritual growth.

This lesson focuses on a parable taught by the Lord. It is the parable of the sower. Many lessons could be learned from this simple passage of Scripture. One thing it shows is that different people will respond to God's message in different ways producing different results. These teachings on kingdom truth can produce the spiritual growth God desires from all His children.

1. _____ **Sowing the Seed (Matthew 13:3)**

The parables of Christ illustrated a specific, important point. They were not stories told merely to entertain the disciples. The Lord gave people help for living. He wanted their lives committed to Him. The parable of the sower is no different. Those who were listening needed to understand the importance of the work they had before them. Those who had been saved had been granted a tremendous blessing. They were the children of God. They should desire to bring more people into the family of God by getting the message of salvation to others.

The principle of sowing the seed was taught by the Lord as being important. In Luke's account of this parable, the Lord offered further explanation. "Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God" (Luke 8:11). The statement of the Lord showed what the work really was. He certainly did not think sowing

wheat seed would produce a spiritual harvest. What people need to hear is the Word of God. Many in the world do not mind religious thoughts. They just do not want to hear the gospel message. It is a message of sin and condemnation. Such thoughts are not pleasant to consider. Who wants to hear they will spend eternity in hell separated from God? Some religions have decided they will not preach such a negative message. They will not preach about the sinfulness of the human condition. They will not talk about the dangers of hell because it is unsettling. Sometimes people need to be unsettled so that they will realize they need Jesus as a Savior. The woman at the well was content with her circumstances until Jesus convinced her of sin. Then, she was gloriously saved. When she became a child of God, she ran to the village of Sychar proclaiming the message, "Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" (John 4:29). She understood her need to sow the seed to those she met. Her testimony and changed life caused a great impact on the city. Many came out to see the man who had spoken to the woman. They listened to her testimony and responded. Then, they listened as Jesus spoke to them. They believed His word and were saved. "And many more believed because of his own word; and said unto the woman, Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world" (verses 41, 42).

The need to sow the seed of God's Word still exists today. People are lost and headed to hell. Though most people think they have a kernel of goodness within, they are without hope if they do not know Christ. God's people must do their work in sowing the seed by sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. _____ **Soils Where the Seed Is Sown** **(Matthew 13:4-9, 19-23)**

The method used by farmers of Jesus' day in broadcasting seed was different than what is done today. Today great machines sow the seed. In His day, the field was prepared by plowing and raking smooth. Then, the farmer would go to the field with a bag over his shoulder. He would begin taking great handfuls of seed and slinging them across the field. As a result of the method, the sowing was not very precise. The seed was strewn over a wide

area and many kinds of soil. Jesus used those soils to illustrate the hearts of those who might hear the gospel message.

Some seed was scattered on the “way side” (verse 4). This term spoke of a road or beaten path. The seed could not easily take root. The birds saw the seed and devoured it before it could germinate. This soil speaks of the lost and hardened heart which is unwilling to listen to the message. The Lord called Isaiah to preach His message though people would not respond to it. His sermon would “make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed” (Isa. 6:10). Many people simply do not want to hear about their sin, so they are glad when Satan snatches the Word out of their hearts. They remain in their sin.

Other seed was scattered on “stony” ground (Matt. 13:5). This soil had many rocks and the plow could not easily break it up. The soil was very shallow. The seed took root there but quickly died because the soil was not easily watered. This could be the heart which hears the message of salvation and responds to the message. But because the individual remains in love with the world, the gospel has only a small impact on his life, and the person falls away from a godly life-style because he has little spiritual depth. Far too many Christians fall into this category. They want an easy Christianity. They desire nothing of the sacrifice of taking up their cross to follow Jesus. God is never pleased when His people fail to follow Christ.

A third kind of soil was the soil with many “thorns” (verse 7). This speaks of seed which takes root but is surrounded by thorns and other invasive plants. The seed could take root and begin to grow, but the thorns would quickly overwhelm the good plants and choked them. This soil speaks of the heart which readily embraces the message of salvation. Then troubles arise and begin to take priority over God. The “care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful” (verse 22). Such a life can accomplish little or nothing in the eyes of the Lord.

The soils and hearts mentioned to this point show how important it is to share the gospel with other people. Many will reject the message, but some may receive it. The challenge is to

make sure we give all people the opportunity to hear the message of salvation.

3. _____ **What Are God's People To Do?**

The fourth kind of soil represents those who hear the message of salvation, respond to it and make it the focus of their lives. They are the good soil where the seed takes good root (verses 8, 23). The message is God's directive for their lives. They share the gospel wherever they go and good results follow. In fact, a person who is committed to being a good witness of Christ will produce "fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty" (verse 23). A fully committed Christian has no limits as to what can be accomplished because that person is willing to let God work through his efforts. This is what God would have His people do.

Conclusion

The parable of the sower teaches many good lessons to the followers of Christ. They must realize God has a purpose for their lives. He wants them to be fully committed to Him and His work. This is where you and I must step up. The world is in dire need of a people who will fulfill the commission Christ gave His churches. Untold billions of people are dying without the Savior because somebody is not busily engaged in broadcasting the seed into the field. Will we step up to the challenge and follow the commission?

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Jesus' Kingdom Demands Childlike Faith

APPLICATION

To show that God's plan of salvation is simple but man complicates it.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Matthew 18:1-14.

Related Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:9; 6:1-9; 11:19; Psalm 78:4-6; Proverbs 22:6; 29:17; Isaiah 38:19; John 5:39; Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:19, 20; 1 Timothy 1:5-12; 2 Timothy 2:15.

Devotional Reading: Teach Children God's Word, 2 Timothy 3:15-17.

Introduction

At what age were you born again? What is the age when a child can understand and be saved? Children can be saved when they realize their natural condition and understand their need to call upon Jesus to save their souls. No one must gain deep, theological understanding to be saved. God's plan is simple. Humanity complicates salvation and endeavors to make it far different from what the Bible teaches.

Teachers in Sunday School and BTC are in the ideal position to help young people come to know Jesus as their Savior. Each lesson should always include the plan of salvation. Every teacher should remind the listeners of the way they can be saved. No one should seek to pressure children (or adults) into receiving Jesus as Savior. Neither should the opportunity to present God's offer of eternal life be neglected. The Lord's purpose in coming to

earth was “to save that which was lost” (Matt. 18:11). Should our purpose be any different?

During His earthly ministry, Jesus never neglected children. Often, He would gather them into His arms showing His love for all people. Jesus went so far as to declare the value of having faith like a little child. This desire for childlike faith will be the focus of this lesson.

1. _____ **The Question Asked (Matthew 18:1)**

The human heart always desires to determine one’s position in the world. People seek honor and endeavor to achieve their goals. The disciples were not immune to such desires. In Mark’s account of this same event, the disciples had disputed about which one of them held the higher position. They had a thorough, somewhat heated dialogue over the subject. They wanted to determine who would have greater authority in the kingdom. Such an attitude illustrated their human character and natural desire for exaltation.

The same attitude surfaces in the hearts of people today. At work, people want to know if they will get the next promotion. In sports, people want their team to achieve the championship no matter what it takes. People want to have the best, the brightest and the highest. The natural desire is to be exalted. Sadly, this attitude spills over into church activities. The church is going through a remodeling phase. New colors must be selected and what the individual wants is far more important than the benefit of renewing the building. Church members are willing to dispute, to argue thoroughly and heatedly, to gain their desire. What a childish attitude! God’s work is more important than the color on the walls or floors. Personal advantage is not essential. Reaching communities for Christ is. That should be our goal.

2. _____ **The Answer Given (Matthew 18:2-5)**

The response of Christ to the mounting problem shows what He thought of their behavior. He took a small child and set him in the middle of their discussion. Now, the focus had changed. They had been concerned with personal advancement. Now, they saw a small child in their midst.

The Lord began telling the disciples of the way children respond to things. They are trusting and easily convinced. “Verily I say

unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). He told them to change their hearts. They should not focus their attention on what they might gain out of a situation. Instead, they should be caring, loving individuals who endeavor to follow Jesus. The word *converted* speaks of changing or reversing one’s course. The disciples had exhibited selfish hearts. Such an attitude was not pleasing to God and would bring no benefit to the kingdom’s work. They needed to reverse course. They should begin thinking of others rather than self. Then their hearts would be more in line with what God wanted.

Their dispute had been over who would be greater in the kingdom of God. The way to achieve greatness in kingdom activities was to serve others. This is how churches can become great. The Lord established His churches for the purpose of being His hands and feet in the world. How can people see Jesus? They see Him through churches doing the little things to benefit those who are hurting. The Lord spoke of the Judgment of Nations. This judgment was based on the treatment of “the least of these my brethren” (Matt. 25:40). The treatment Jesus specified was feeding the hungry, helping the homeless and ministering to the hurting (verses 35, 36). The Lord expects His churches to be engaged in ministering to the world. This is how the kingdom of God is advanced.

3. _____

The Warning Issued (Matthew 18:6-10)

It is sad to consider that sometimes churches do not exhibit God’s love to the world. Instead, they conduct their business in such a manner as to discourage people from coming and participating in service. Some churches like to bicker and fight about every decision they make. The fight tends to drive people away. Lost people need to see a church whose members love one another.

Jesus presented some concepts which are puzzling to some people. He said it was better to pluck out one’s eye than to have wrong thoughts. It was better to cut off one’s hand or foot than to do the wrong things. Did Jesus really mean for His people to chop off a hand or to poke out an eye? No, He was illustrating a point. He wanted them to get their attitudes and hearts right.

He wanted His followers to be engaged in ministry and service to the world. God's people tend to look at others with a judgmental eye. This person would be a good prospect for membership while that person would not. Only God knows who would be the greatest benefit to the church. What we must do is try to reach all people for Him. Why is this? "For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost" (Matt. 18:11). Who are the lost ones? Everyone who is born into the world needs Jesus as Savior. We must do what we can by having faith like a little child.

4. _____

The Illustration Given (Matthew 18:11-14)

Jesus spoke of a shepherd with one hundred sheep. One had wandered alone into the wilderness. The shepherd left the remainder of the flock in the sheepfold and went out into the mountains to find the one lost lamb. He cared for all the flock. He searched until he found the one lost sheep. He rejoiced greatly when the lost lamb was once again in safety.

The illustration shows the heart of God toward humanity. He cares for all people. He is thankful for those who are in the safety of the flock, but He also cares for all others. His heart is on display in His willingness to send His only begotten Son as the sacrifice for sin. The love of the Savior is in evidence by His seeking out the lost so that they might be saved (Luke 19:10). Since God has shown so much love and compassion for lost humanity, God's people should also demonstrate His love by reaching out to those around them. Then, we are following the example of the Savior and His compassion.

Conclusion

God has a single plan for people to be saved. He does not make His plan complicated or difficult. It is so simple even a child can understand. Childhood is the perfect time to reach people with the gospel. Their hearts are open and their thoughts uncluttered with the cares of the world. They are in the perfect place to hear about Jesus and trust Him as Savior. The problem comes when people try to make more of the plan of salvation than God intended. He wants all people to come to Him and be saved. What we must do is simply present the plan as God gave it. Then, we can trust Him for positive results.

Jesus' Kingdom Is Also for the Rich

APPLICATION

To show that God receives all classes of people.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Luke 19:1-10.

Related Scripture: Genesis 6:8; 12:1-5; 18:14; 2 Chronicles 24:1, 2; 28:1, 2; Job 1:1-3; 42:2; Jeremiah 32:17, 27; Mark 10:27; 14:36; Luke 1:37; 18:27.

Devotional Reading: The Difficulty of Riches, Matthew 19:16-26.

Introduction

Who has the opportunity to be saved? Often churches appear a little intimidated by those who are wealthy. They seem to think it is impossible to reach those who have great financial success. People remember the words of Jesus when the rich, young ruler had approached Him desiring eternal life. Undoubtedly, he thought he could spend some of his great wealth and obtain that which he desired. Jesus was quick to point out salvation did not come through his wealth. Instead, any person must stop trusting in riches and trust in Jesus Christ. The rich, young man departed from Christ in sadness. As Jesus watched the man depart from His presence, the Lord turned to the disciples and said, "Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:23, 24). The disciples were amazed at His statement. They wondered how anyone

could be saved. Jesus answered that salvation was not by human effort. It is impossible for any person to deserve eternal life, but “with God all things are possible” (verse 26).

The biblical record shows that rich people can be saved. Solomon was possibly the richest man ever to live; yet, he was a child of God. James and John were two of the apostles. Their father was a successful businessman who owned more than one fishing vessel. The wealth or poverty a person has is not the determining factor whether that individual will become a child of God. Each person must turn to Jesus and receive Him as Savior. This act of repentance and faith insures any person of a place in Heaven.

This lesson discusses a man who was wealthy. People can get to Heaven without many things. No one needs wealth, possessions, family or even organized religion to gain entrance into Heaven. Jesus is the only way for any person (rich or poor, male or female, or any race) to become a child of God.

1. _____ **His Character (Luke 19:2)**

Zacchaeus lived in a time when wealth was difficult to attain. A person had to be in the right place at the right time. He had to be willing to do almost anything to gain wealth. This could have been what happened with Zacchaeus. His name indicates he was an Israelite. His parents had not given him a Greek name which would have shown that they had embraced the Gentile life-style. He was raised among the Jews, but must have had a great desire for wealth. To abandon his people and to work with the Roman government meant wealth was more important than his heritage. He chose as his profession the occupation of publican or tax collector.

The office of tax collector was especially hated by the Jewish people. They hated the thought of supporting some government other than their own king. Israelites who worked with the Romans were looked upon as the worst sort of people. Publicans were normally foreigners who were brought in to oversee the work of collecting the wealth of a nation. They did so without concern because their wealth was derived from the taxes they gathered. They employed locals in their work which caused these native people to be greatly despised. Zacchaeus might have begun his work under the hand of a foreign publican. However,

he was so skilled at collecting taxes, Zacchaeus soon took over a region and was its chief collector. He gained his wealth from these taxes. Often the taxes were inflated by unfair practices. The only recourse was to appeal the tax, but those appeals were rarely successful. The more a man could extort from the people, the wealthier he became. Zacchaeus had been successful and was extremely wealthy.

Being a tax collector made Zacchaeus unacceptable to the Jewish people. He was excluded from Temple worship because he had frequent contact with Gentiles. He was hated because of his profession. Zacchaeus might have been the wealthiest man in Jericho, but he was separated from his people.

2. _____ **His Desire (Luke 19:3, 4)**

Jesus constantly traveled from one place to another. His custom was to preach where people were so that they would have the opportunity to hear the gospel of the kingdom. Zacchaeus had heard of that preacher and wanted to know more about Him. Word quickly spread through Jericho that Jesus was passing through. Jericho was the dwelling place of many priests. Zacchaeus must have assumed Jesus would spend time with them. He would have no opportunity to hear Him or meet Him.

As a last resort, Zacchaeus determined how he might see Jesus. He ran ahead of His procession and saw a sycamore tree. If he remained on the street, his vision would be blocked because Zacchaeus was very short. The sycamore tree had the appearance and size of a mulberry tree but bore a kind of fig. The tree was easily climbed and Zacchaeus was soon up the tree with a clear view of the road.

Why would such a wealthy man put forth such effort to see one who was only popular with the common people? Maybe Zacchaeus understood his deep spiritual need. Maybe his loneliness became too strong, and he wanted companionship even from a distance. Whatever the reason, Zacchaeus had the desire to see Jesus and to understand more about Him. He spent his energies to be in the position to have his desire satisfied.

3. _____ **His Unexpected Guest (Luke 19:5-7)**

Zacchaeus had gone in the right direction. The tree he climbed was on the path taken by the Lord. Jesus came to the spot and

looked into the tree. A sycamore tree had big leaves and someone hiding among them would be difficult to view. Yet, Jesus knew the tax collector would be there and stopped to have a brief conversation with him. Jesus knew the heart of the man hiding in the tree. He called out, “Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house” (Luke 19:5). What joy must have gone into the heart of the tax collector. He had merely wanted a glimpse of the Master. Now, he would have the privilege of hosting Him for a meal. That was far beyond his expectations.

When the Lord extended the invitation for Zacchaeus to join Him, the tax collector eagerly received Him into his house. Zacchaeus rejoiced that the Lord was willing to associate with him. Now, he had no hesitation or reluctance. He was accepted.

The reaction of the others of the city was far different. They knew exactly who Zacchaeus was. He was a traitor who conspired with the government to steal their wealth. They hated him. How could the Lord even stand to be in his presence? Their complaint was that Jesus had consented to be in the company of one they considered a sinner. What these people failed to realize was that they were just as sinful as the tax collector. The difference was he realized his condition, and they proudly felt they were above sin. The response of the Lord to the broken heart of Zacchaeus shows how much He loves all people without regard to their social, financial or religious condition. He loves people and wants to save them.

4. _____ **His Change (Luke 19:8-10)**

As Jesus sat with Zacchaeus, the tax collector exhibited a change of heart. He had gained great wealth at the expense of others. Now, things had changed. What he said to Jesus showed how much his feelings and compassion had changed.

Zacchaeus began by declaring his intent to use his wealth to benefit others. Before that day, his only desire had been the accumulation of wealth. Now, he would help others by sharing his wealth. Those he had ignored he would now help. Then, he stated a change in policy. No longer would he extort money from the helpless. Those he had abused with his power, he would make amends. His desire was to show a different heart. What had happened on the inside would have an impact on the outside.

This is the way God would have people to behave. Their faith should be more than just something they believe. They should let their faith play out in their actions.

When Jesus heard the words of Zacchaeus and saw the honesty of his heart, He declared, “This day is salvation come to this house” (Luke 19:9). Jesus had taught at other times the value of showing one’s faith in life. Each child of God should demonstrate what God has done. John wrote about this kind of life. “Let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). God’s people must bear good fruit for Him. If we are a good tree, then we should bear good fruit in His work. The change within must be evident without.

Conclusion

Zacchaeus was a wealthy man who had lived far apart from God’s will. He had deceived others and wrongfully taken what was not proper. Though he had everything the world could offer, he was not a child of God. He was not lost because he was wealthy. He was lost because he had not received Jesus as his Savior. The same is true today. People are lost because they have not received Jesus as the way of eternal life. No matter who a person is, all can be saved without regard to their social or financial standing. Jesus is the same loving Savior who reaches out to all people. “For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

Jesus Speaks of Kingdom Pay

APPLICATION

To show God is fair in what He pays His laborers.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Matthew 20:1-16.

Related Scripture: Joshua 24:15; 1 Kings 18:21; Jeremiah 35:15; Ezekiel 33:11; Hosea 6:1; Matthew 8:11; 19:27-30; Luke 14:16-24; John 5:22, 27; Romans 14:11, 12; 2 Corinthians 5:10.

Devotional Reading: The Son Rewards Servants, Mark 10:28-31.

Introduction

The parables Jesus taught concerning the kingdom of Heaven gave principles which can help to govern active service in His work today. The teaching of the lesson Text gives another aspect of kingdom activity. It concerns the pay, the rewards for doing what God has commanded.

When applying for a new job, a person is always concerned about the wages for the occupation. Will the salary be greater than before? Will it be enough to support the family? These questions are valid in evaluating whether or not to take the new position. How can this discussion apply to one's participation in the work of the Lord?

The most common mistake in the religious world is the misconception that God will always reward in this life. Many name-it-and-claim-it televangelists promote the idea that, if a person will be faithful to God, He is obligated to grant material

wealth. The New Testament gives no such promise. Because of their faithfulness, many were persecuted rather than receiving material gain. The desire for earthly wealth is a real problem (1 Tim. 6:9). The priorities of those longing for wealth are wrong. These people are headed for disaster. God's people should have a higher goal. "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33).

This lesson deals with understanding the hope within the heart of God's people. The goal is to comprehend the equality of the work and the blessedness of God's eternal compensation to those who are faithful to Him.

1. _____ **Hiring Laborers (Matthew 20:1-7)**

The ministry of the Lord's churches was compared to a man with a vineyard. The labor in the vineyard could have been tending the vines, pulling weeds or even harvesting the crop. The value of this parable is what it says about rewards or compensation for the work.

The owner of the vineyard went to the marketplace to find someone to work that day. He was waiting there when the laborers arrived. As they came, the man agreed to pay them a penny for their day's labor. The penny (denarius) was the normal wages for a day's labor. Under normal conditions, this would provide what was necessary for his family to survive. These men were thankful for the opportunity to work. They would work all day for that penny.

When insufficient laborers were found to perform the needed work, the property owner returned to the marketplace about three hours later. He told them to go and work in his vineyard and he would pay them a fair wage. This time no set amount was specified. He went back to the marketplace at noon and at three in the afternoon. Each time, he told the workers to go to his vineyard, and he would pay them fair wages. At five in the afternoon, about one hour before quitting time, the landowner returned for more workers. If they would go to the field, he would pay them a fair wage. At each invitation to work, some went out to the field to labor.

The Lord has the need of workers in His vineyard. Some are called and respond quite early and spend much time in service. Others receive the call later and have fewer days to give Him.

Some even wait until the last moments of life to respond to God's call. The wasted years of some lives are quite sad. People who respond early are truly blessed to have the opportunity to give many years in active service to the One who saved their souls.

2. _____

Paying the Laborers (Matthew 20:8-10)

In the parable, the laborers went out to the vineyard at various times during the day. Those who responded early had spent twelve hours toiling in the field. Others spent progressively less time in their labors. As the day drew to its close, the owner called them together to dispense the wages. One would naturally assume there would be a sliding scale for hours of labor. The men who had worked but one hour came to receive their small amount. When the owner paid them, they received a penny (denarius), the normal amount given for a full day's work. Undoubtedly, they were extremely happy at the generosity he showed. Each group who came to be paid received the same amount. All received a penny. The reaction of the various workers reflects the common attitude of most people. They do not mind the generosity of a kind person as long as they are benefited from it. If they feel slighted, then they are not so happy.

The spiritual application deals with God's work today. While different people begin their service at differing times of life, God reserves the right to reward as He sees fit. People will not always understand why things turn out the way they do, but God is sovereign and can do what He chooses. In the day of judgment, God's people will stand before Him to receive the things done in this body (2 Cor. 5:10). The rewards He grants will be according to His divine and perfect purpose. He is the righteous Judge and will do all things properly and justly (John 5:30). God's people should live in such a manner that when they stand before the Lord, they can have confidence and not be ashamed (1 John 2:28).

3. _____

Debate Between Laborers and Farmer (Matthew 20:11-16)

When the master of the vineyard paid the wages to his laborers, some were quite happy while others were displeased. Those laborers who had gone out early in the morning to work in the field and had labored all day were unhappy. "These last have

wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day” (Matt. 20:12). They felt it was unfair for those laborers who had worked only one hour to receive the same wages as they received. When the heat of midday came, they were working. When the cool of the evening began rolling around and those last workers came to the field, the early risers were still laboring. Surely, they deserved more than those workers who worked such a little time. While the logic of their argument might make sense, their work and wages had been determined and agreed upon early that morning. They were receiving exactly what they had been promised when the day began. But now that things had worked out differently for some other people, they wanted to change their contract.

The owner of the vineyard responded to their complaints. He had not slighted them but had paid them the amount they had agreed upon. Just because he was generous with the other workers did not mean he had treated the early workers badly. He had dealt honestly with them and paid them their wages. They should have been content.

In the work of the Lord, the time one begins service to the King is immaterial. The key is to be involved in His work. Some people will think that because they have been in church for many years, they should have more power and control than someone who has only been there for a few years. The Lord’s service is His work, not ours. God owns and operates His kingdom. We must be willing to yield to Him and let Him determine what is best.

Conclusion

Compensation for labor is something people think about. They want an honest wage for honest work. But when it comes to the work of the Lord, they want grace rather than wages. They want God to be extremely generous with His blessings even though they have not been too faithful in His ministry. The Lord is always gracious. He always gives greater and better than we deserve. However, He does expect something from us. It is not that we must earn our way to Heaven. That was paid for in His shed blood. Instead, it is because of our claimed love for the Master that we should engage in service. When you stand before the righteous Judge, will you hear the refrain, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21)?

Jesus' Kingdom Demands Obedience

APPLICATION

To show that talk is not as important as action in God's kingdom service.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Matthew 21:28-32.

Related Scripture: Deuteronomy 13:13; Proverbs 26:11; Luke 7:30; 12:47, 48; John 8:34; 9:41; 15:22; Acts 20:30, 31; Romans 6:16; 1 Timothy 1:18-20; 2 Timothy 4:10; 1 John 2:19.

Devotional Reading: Obedience Is Required, 2 Peter 2:9-22.

Introduction

Choices are a natural part of life. Each day people choose to do some things and not to do other things. The Lord offered a challenge to His disciples about the matter of choices. "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). No one is forced to follow Christ. It is a matter of choice. However, if a person wants to be pleasing to God, then that individual must make the choice of obedience.

The single most important choice a person can make in life is the choice concerning the Savior. The Lord will never force anyone into being saved. If people are to become the children of God, they must come God's way. Jesus is the only way of gaining eternal life. People can choose to receive or reject Him. Those who turn away from Jesus to seek eternal life by some other means will, by their choice, spend eternity separated from God. God did not force them to go there. It was a matter of their choice to reject

the gift of eternal life. The Bible gives examples of those who had the opportunity to be saved but turned away from eternal life. Judas Iscariot sat under the teaching of Jesus for three years. He heard the message of repentance and faith, but refused the offer of eternal life. The rich, young ruler desired to gain eternal life and came to Jesus to find out how to be saved. When the Lord told him, he walked away sorrowful because he would not turn away from his riches. These and others had the opportunity to be saved but turned away from Christ. To be saved, people must come to Jesus. He is the only path to salvation.

When people are the children of God, obedience is needful for them to be pleasing to Him. The lesson Text relates what took place in a family. Jesus used this account to show the value of obeying the instructions of the Heavenly Father.

1. _____

Asking for an Opinion
(Matthew 21:28-31)

When Jesus taught those who came to Him, He used different methods of instruction. Often, the Lord taught by way of parables. These were illustrations from real life from which spiritual lessons could be drawn. Preachers often relate stories from their experience to illustrate some truth they want to emphasize. The Lord could have followed that same pattern. Real-life stories have an impact on the thinking of others. They can learn from the events of someone's life.

Jesus told of a certain man who had two sons. These two sons were normal young men. They had different likes and dislikes. They reacted to their father in differing ways. This is common with people. No two people are exactly alike. Even twins have differences of personality. The Lord wanted to emphasize the different ways people can react to similar requests.

As Jesus began relating the parable to His listeners, He asked a question, "But what think ye?" (Matt. 21:28). The Lord had been talking about the value of faith and how powerful a small portion of faith could be. When He came into the Temple grounds, the priests asked about the authority He possessed. They were opposed to Him and were seeking to catch Him in a trap. Jesus responded by asking about the authority of John the Baptist. He knew the priests were afraid to answer because the people thought John to be a prophet. When they refused to

answer, Jesus launched into the parable concerning obedience and disobedience. He wanted them to see how they were religious but had never really obeyed the Father.

God's people should open their eyes to what the Lord wants them to learn. People often think messages or lessons are for other people, not them. On this occasion, Jesus wanted all the people, both priests and others, to realize their personal responsibility to obey the commandments of God.

2. _____

Actions of the Sons (Matthew 21:28-30)

In the parable, the man and two sons lived on a farm where the efforts of the entire family were necessary. The father might have had some business to transact and needed his sons to go to the field to take care of the crops.

He came to the first son. He was probably the elder. The father requested that he go out to the field to work that day. Maybe the son had plans. Maybe he simply did not want to work that day. He answered his father in a disrespectful manner. "I will not" (Matt. 21:29). He had no intentions of taking his precious time and wasting it in the field. He could have no fun or entertainment in the field. Then, as time passed, the son began to feel guilty about his reaction to the father's request. The Scripture says, "Afterward he repented, and went" (verse 29). This word has the thought of regretting one's actions and taking appropriate measures to change. The son's conduct had begun negatively. He had shown disrespect for his father by his blunt refusal. His heart was better than that. He turned from his wrong attitude and went to work to help his father. His actions proved to be obedient to the father even though his words did not express obedience.

Does this parable excuse saying the wrong thing or being hateful by one's words? Parables were given to prove some special point, to present a spiritual truth. When looking at parables, people often try to take secondary matters and make them primary. The focus of Christ's words here were to emphasize the value of obedience. The other parts of the illustration serve to stress the importance of the central theme. Saying, "No," does not excuse a person from doing what is right.

The father came to the second son. He made the same request of this son. This son pleasantly agreed to go. But when the time came for work to be done, he was nowhere to be found. His words had been what the father wanted to hear, but his actions were disobedient. Maybe he had the good intention to go out and work, but he failed in the intention. He failed his father.

Some people love to talk about their service to the Father. They want to relate all they have done in the past. The problem is that they are doing nothing right now. If a person loves to talk about his past service but is failing right now, one must question how much was really done in the past. God expects His people to be engaged in ministry right now. “My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). Actions speak louder than words.

3. _____

**Answer Given by Christ
(Matthew 21:31, 32)**

Jesus drew the illustration to its conclusion by asking another question, “Whether of them twain did the will of his father?” (Matt. 21:31). No one would question which son was actually obedient. The second son had spoken the right words but had not entered the work. The first son intended not to serve but realized it was the right thing to do. The first son had performed the desires of the father. He had been obedient.

The Lord took this truth and applied it to those who had been listening to Him. The Temple priests were busy about works, but they had neglected what God really wanted. When John the Baptist had preached repentance and faith, those religious leaders had neglected to listen. They thought they were religiously perfect. They kept all the rituals and forms. What more could be desired? What God wanted was more than just an outward expression of religion. He wanted hearts to change. The priests refused any such admonition. They remained in their selfish, self-serving ways.

Jesus then spoke of another group of people. These people were the publicans and harlots (verse 32). These were the people most hated by the self-righteous religious leaders. They looked down on worldly people as being unclean and unworthy of forgiveness. Yet, those people, the sinners and outcast, were the ones who were willing to listen to John’s message of repentance

and faith. Maybe it was that they knew as well as others that they were sinners. They readily admitted their sinfulness and willingly turned from their sin. Their repentance assured them of forgiveness. Their lives could now change. They were obedient to the call of the gospel.

These two groups show the difference in people. Many are religiously self-confident. They are happy where they are because they feel good about themselves. They will never come to Jesus for forgiveness because they see no need of forgiveness. People who are aware of their sins are more open to the preaching of the gospel. They realize their condition and will beg Christ to forgive them. They will be forgiven because they obey His call.

Conclusion

What choice will you make right now? God has a purpose for every one of us. He wants His people to follow His commands. This means they are to be obedient.

Obedience is not always easy. For some it will mean surrendering to God's call to enter ministry. This might mean they must travel to distant places to obey His calling on their lives. For others, it will mean they must turn loose of some habits they are happy with. The lives of God's people should be pleasing to Him, not to the world. If your actions are not pleasing to God, then obedience means you must turn away from them. Obedience is certainly not always easy, but it is the wise thing to do. Just talking about service is not enough. We must step up and do what God wants. That is obedience.

Jesus' Kingdom Passes Judgment

APPLICATION

To show that those who reject God's message will be judged.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Matthew 21:33-46.

Related Scripture: Numbers 14:29, 37; Psalm 118:22, 23; Isaiah 28:16; Daniel 2:34, 35; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17, 18; Acts 4:10-12; Romans 9:31-33; 1 Corinthians 1:23; 1 Peter 2:6-8; Jude 5.

Devotional Reading: Stumbling Stone—Grinding Stone, Isaiah 8:13-15.

Introduction

As Jesus related the various parables, He was not using these stories to entertain those who listened to Him. The Lord wanted to impart spiritual truths to those who really heard what He said. The disciples had asked Jesus why He used so many parables when He spoke. His response was, "Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand" (Matt. 13:13). The people did not lack the ability to understand what He said. Instead, their attention was on other matters. His statement did not say they could not see, hear or understand. They chose not to know what He talked about. The parables should have imparted to them spiritual knowledge, but they did not allow His words to sink into their hearts.

The parable under discussion in this lesson shows the danger of failing to listen to the Lord. The Lord came to His own people

so that they would have the opportunity to hear and respond to His loving, gracious message. Instead, they rejected Him (John 1:11). The people to whom the Old Testament prophecies had been given rejected the fulfillment of those words. The Israelites who should have been the first to recognize their Messiah looked on Him as a stranger. As a result, judgment would soon fall upon them.

The matter of judgment is one most people do not enjoy discussing. They might not mind declaring judgment on others, but to consider that they will stand before the righteous Judge is the last thing on their minds. God is gracious, loving and kind, but His holiness demands justice. Those who reject Him and His gracious gift must stand condemned because of their actions. Though this thought is not pleasant or desirable, the holiness and righteousness of God demand proper judgment. This kind of judgment will be meted out at the appropriate time. When the Lord talked about the kingdom of God, judgment was part of the discussion.

This lesson will discuss a parable which relates the dangers of rejecting God and His gift of eternal life. All people need to beware of treating Christ wrongly. Judgment is coming and all must be prepared.

1. _____

**The Unfaithful Workers
(Matthew 21:33-39)**

In this parable a landowner developed a segment of his land as investment property. He put everything on the land needful to make it profitable. He bought and planted fine grapevines. He prepared the land for production by building a fence around the property. He even built a winepress so that the ones who kept the vineyard would find it more profitable. The landowner found men who were willing to work the land and pay the proper rent. The landowner felt all was well and departed to his homeland, waiting for the profits to come.

The years went by and those who had rented the property began reaping the benefits of the land. When the time was right, the owner sent his servants to require the rent owed for use of the land. The men who had agreed to pay rent were unwilling to keep their agreement. Some of the servants were beaten and released to return home empty-handed. Other servants were

abused and killed. Crop after crop was harvested and none of the benefits returned to the landowner. This was unacceptable.

Finally, the landowner arrived at a plan which he thought would be successful. If he sent his only son to them, surely they would hold the son in respect. He sent the son to the wicked workers expecting to receive what was due to him. Instead, the men looked at the son as the last obstacle to actually owning the property. They captured the son when he arrived at the vineyard. They dragged him off the property and brutally killed him. They believed the ownership would immediately fall to them.

What happened with the wicked workers has a spiritual application. How do people respond to the gracious gifts of God? All people who dwell on earth have received blessings from Him. The earth is the handiwork of God and because of His creative act is His possession. Yet, people live on the earth and reap the benefits of a land which is not really their possession. Though they are the recipients of God's blessings, far too many respond to Him with hostility and hatred. They want the benefits, but not the responsibility. They live without regard to the origin of their blessing. People who live on earth without regard to God are just as wicked as those workers of the parable. They gained the benefits of a land not their own. They even killed the rightful heir to the property. They are certainly worthy of the judgment which will naturally follow.

2. _____ **The Judgment (Matthew 21:40, 41)**

As a person hears what Jesus said on that occasion, one's natural anger begins to increase. To think of people so cruel as to treat a man so horribly is almost beyond the imagination. The self-righteous priests to whom Jesus spoke undoubtedly had such an emotional response. No one should get away with that kind of behavior. The Lord turned to His listeners and asked, "When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?" (Matt. 21:40). In the minds of those men who considered themselves to be above anything sinful, the answer was clear. They knew the appropriate response to evil behavior. When the owner of the property returned to it, he would "miserably destroy those wicked men" (verse 41). They had behaved sinfully and cruelly. Now, they would get the consequences of their behavior.

The answer of the Temple priests went even further. Not only would the present renters be destroyed for their criminal acts, the master of the land would then find worthy workers to take the vineyard and produce crops there. They would work the land and pay the proper rent. Little did those priests know they had condemned themselves.

The attitude these men had toward the wicked workers was understandable. These evil men had taken advantage of the situation. The owner of the property lived in a distant land, so they thought they could possess the land without any fear of repercussions. No person with any sense of morality would behave in that manner. The problem for the priests was that their attitude was self-righteous and judgmental. People find it easy to find fault in others while being guilty of the same kind of sin. Jesus spoke of those who look at others and see a tiny splinter in their eyes but cannot see the beam in their own eyes (Matt. 7:3-5). Being judgmental will hinder our testimony concerning Christ.

3. _____

The Lessons Taught (Matthew 21:42-46)

As Jesus drew this illustration to its conclusion, He wanted to impart spiritual knowledge to those who were listening. The lesson began with their failure to understand who He was.

In the parable, the master had an only son. That son was taken by wicked men and cruelly killed. The son in the story pictured Jesus, the Son of God. The Old Testament had foretold the rejection of the Israelites. The Lord gave them the verse which applied to the situation. “The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the LORD’S doing; it is marvellous in our eyes” (Psalm 118:22, 23). The Messiah would come to His people and be rejected. Though He was the chief Cornerstone, the people would turn against Him. Though rejected by His people, God would take the rejected stone and make it the primary foundation for the building. Jesus is the chief Cornerstone. He was accepted by the Father.

Israel had been the chosen people of God from the time of Abraham. The Lord had promised that his descendants would be God’s for all time to come. When their Messiah arrived and they rejected Him, the Father turned from the people of Israel for a

time. The work they should have done in spreading the gospel to the world was taken from them and given to another people. Those people to whom the work was given would primarily be a Gentile people. Throughout church history, congregations have been primarily Gentile. God has never refused to save anyone who came to Him in repentance and faith, but the minds of the Jews have been blinded by their choices making it difficult to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Few have taken advantage of their opportunity. But vast numbers of Gentiles have been saved. We are blessed to have the opportunity to do God's work today. We should take advantage of the opportunity and reach the world with the gospel.

A final warning came from the lips of the Savior. "Whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder" (Matt. 21:44). No one can stand against the purposes of God. When a person seeks to change God's plans, that individual will only find failure and judgment. People should recognize what God wants and determine to accomplish whatever task the Lord assigns.

Conclusion

The message of this parable is clear. The Lord has the right to exercise judgment upon those who stand against Him. No one questions whether He is just in bringing chastisement upon the Jews for their rejection of Him as their Messiah. But to say that Christ is just in chastening His children today bothers many people. Those who stand against the Lord are in danger of the stone falling upon them and grinding them to powder. Not a pleasant thought, but that fact should awaken us to the great need of obeying the Lord. He is just and righteous, and we must follow Him.

Jesus' Kingdom Calls for Readiness

APPLICATION

To show the need to prepare for Christ's return.

SCRIPTURES TO READ

Text: Matthew 25:1-13.

Related Scripture: Matthew 24:26-44; 25:14-30; Mark 13:32-37; Luke 12:31-40; 21:34-36; 2 Timothy 4:6-8; 2 Peter 3:10-18; 1 John 2:28—3:3; Revelation 3:3; 16:15.

Devotional Reading: Ready for Christ's Return, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11.

Introduction

A great, old song speaks of the wonder of the day when Jesus will return to the earth. "What a day that will be when my Jesus I will see, And I look upon His face, the One who saved me by His grace; When He takes me by the hand, and leads me through the Promised Land, What a day, glorious day that will be" (words and music by Jim Hill). Looking toward the day of the Lord's return truly sparks interest in the hearts of most people. They are concerned about how events will unfold. But something more important than knowing the details of that coming day is the value of being prepared for His return.

Preparation is a constant theme throughout the Bible. Noah received the warning from God that judgment was soon to come on the earth. A great flood would overwhelm the land, and all who lived there would die. For Noah to have deliverance from that judgment, he had to be prepared. This included building the ark to preserve Noah's family and the animal life of earth. Preparation

was required for the deliverance to come. The children of Israel had to be prepared for their release from Egyptian bondage. This preparation included the Passover celebration. Then, the Lord brought them deliverance. Preparation was needful for those people. In the verses of the lesson Text, Jesus gave another parable. This time He encouraged all people to be prepared for His return. This might have seemed a little strange considering the fact that Jesus was in their midst. He knew what was soon to come. He would be removed from their physical presence and they would be living in anticipation of His return. Preparation was needful to be ready for that day. The children of God face many battles. The Lord gave the means by which people can be successful against the attacks of Satan. When the people of God are willing to follow the directions of their Heavenly Father, they are preparing for the day of His return.

The parable of the ten virgins teaches lessons for the people of God today. The value of preparation is at the forefront of what the Lord said. When we begin to see the nearness of the Lord's return, we will begin preparing for that day.

1. _____

The Wedding Celebration **(Matthew 25:1)**

As Jesus began telling this parable, He described a common scene from daily life in Israel. He spoke of a wedding celebration. Their weddings did not resemble the ceremonies which take place today. The end result was the same—a man and a woman were joined together as husband and wife. But the events leading up to that union were far different. During the engagement time, the groom was busily engaged in preparing a place for his bride. As their new home neared its completion, preparations were made for a great celebration. Finally, the day arrived. The groom would begin the trek to his bride's home to take her as his wife. His friends and family would accompany him on the mission. As they walked through the streets of the city, they would gather additional friends to join in the celebration. The friends of the bride would be waiting in the streets with their wedding lamps to brighten the way for the procession. These lamps were fueled by oil and would burn brightly. When the procession arrived at the bride's house, the groom took his wife, and they returned to

his father's house for the wedding feast. The celebration often lasted an entire week. It was a joyous time for all.

In the parable Jesus gave, ten virgins went out into the streets to prepare for the coming celebration. Each had her lamp and waited for the procession to pass by so that she could join in the festivities. In their minds, nothing could keep them from the joy to come.

The parable points the attention of the believer ahead to a glorious time yet in the future. The day will come when the Lord will return to take His saints home to be with Him. That procession of saved people will be in preparation for taking His bride as His very own. The virgins of the parable anticipated the moment when the groom arrived so that they could witness the marriage and be joyful with all the guests. People today should always be anticipating the time when Jesus will come back.

2. _____ **The Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:2-12)**

The ten virgins had gone out into the streets in anticipation of the coming wedding party. Each had the same opportunity of preparation. All ten could have left home with enough oil to last through the night. Five of those virgins did. They realized the exact moment of the groom's arrival was not known. He could delay until later in the evening. They prepared by bringing additional oil if that delay occurred.

While they waited, they all became weary. They had spent the day in feverish preparation. Now, they fell asleep. Then, they heard the trumpet blast. That was the signal of the coming groom. Quickly they set about trimming their lamps so that they would burn brightly. This is where the difficulty came for some of the virgins.

The foolish virgins awoke and set about cleaning their lamps in anticipation of what was coming. While they had been asleep, the oil in the lamp had burned up. Now, they had no oil for their lamps to greet the groom and be included in the wedding party. What could they do?

The wise virgins awoke with the same purpose. They would clean their lamps and add oil so that their lamps would brightly shine. They had realized the potential problem and prepared for every possibility. They had plenty of oil to add to their lamps so that they would burn through the night. The foolish virgins saw

the plenty of the wise virgins and began to ask them to share. Their statement showed the folly of their failure, “Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out” (Matt. 25:8). The purpose of having the lamps was for them to burn brightly. The lamp was useless without the fuel. These five were unprepared for what was to happen.

The wise virgins refused the request because they knew they had brought exactly what they needed. If they gave away their oil, then they would not have sufficient for the celebration to come. They counseled the others to run to the market and buy the oil they required. The advice was for them to make last minute preparations. The problem with last minute preparations is that sometimes they are made too late.

The five foolish virgins ran to find oil for their lamps. They found it, but the party had already passed when they returned. They went to the house where the celebration was taking place. The door to the manor had been closed and locked. They knocked on the door requesting to be allowed entrance to the celebration. They begged the keeper of the door, “Lord, Lord, open to us” (verse 11). The governor of the feast looked out and refused to let them in. They had the opportunity to participate in the celebration. Since they had neglected this important matter, they were refused entrance to the festivities.

What took place with the wise virgins and the foolish virgins serves as a warning to people today. Paul wrote about the importance of being ready today. “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). Preparations are required for entrance.

3. _____ **Preparation Provides Readiness**

As the Lord brought this parable to its conclusion, He related its purpose. Though we often try to inject many spiritual applications to what He said, Jesus explained why He gave this lesson. “Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh” (Matt. 25:13). The day of Jesus’ return will come some day. The hour of His coming is not known to any person. Many people have tried to set the day for His arrival on earth. One man wrote a book explaining why Jesus would return in a particular year. He had eighty-eight reasons why that was the year it would happen. The year came and went

and Jesus did not return. He wrote another book explaining why Jesus would come back the next year. No person has insight into the exact moment Jesus will come to take His people home. That knowledge is not our responsibility. Our task and duty is to make preparations for His coming whenever it might be.

The primary admonition for the people of God is for them to “watch” (verse 13). This is a simple word meaning to keep awake and alert, to know what is going on around the individual. Jesus wants His people to be alert to all that is happening in the world. He gave ample warning of events which would take place just prior to His return. No, they do not predict the exact moment, but they do allow people to anticipate His return. Far too many people are asleep rather than watchful. The work of God does not proceed when His people are not alert and ready. They need to watch and prepare.

Conclusion

“What a day, glorious day that will be!” Are we looking for that day to come? Peter wrote about the time when Jesus would return. God’s people should be, “Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God” (2 Peter 3:12). Are you longing for the day when Jesus will come and take us to be with Him? If not, why not? It will truly be a glorious day.