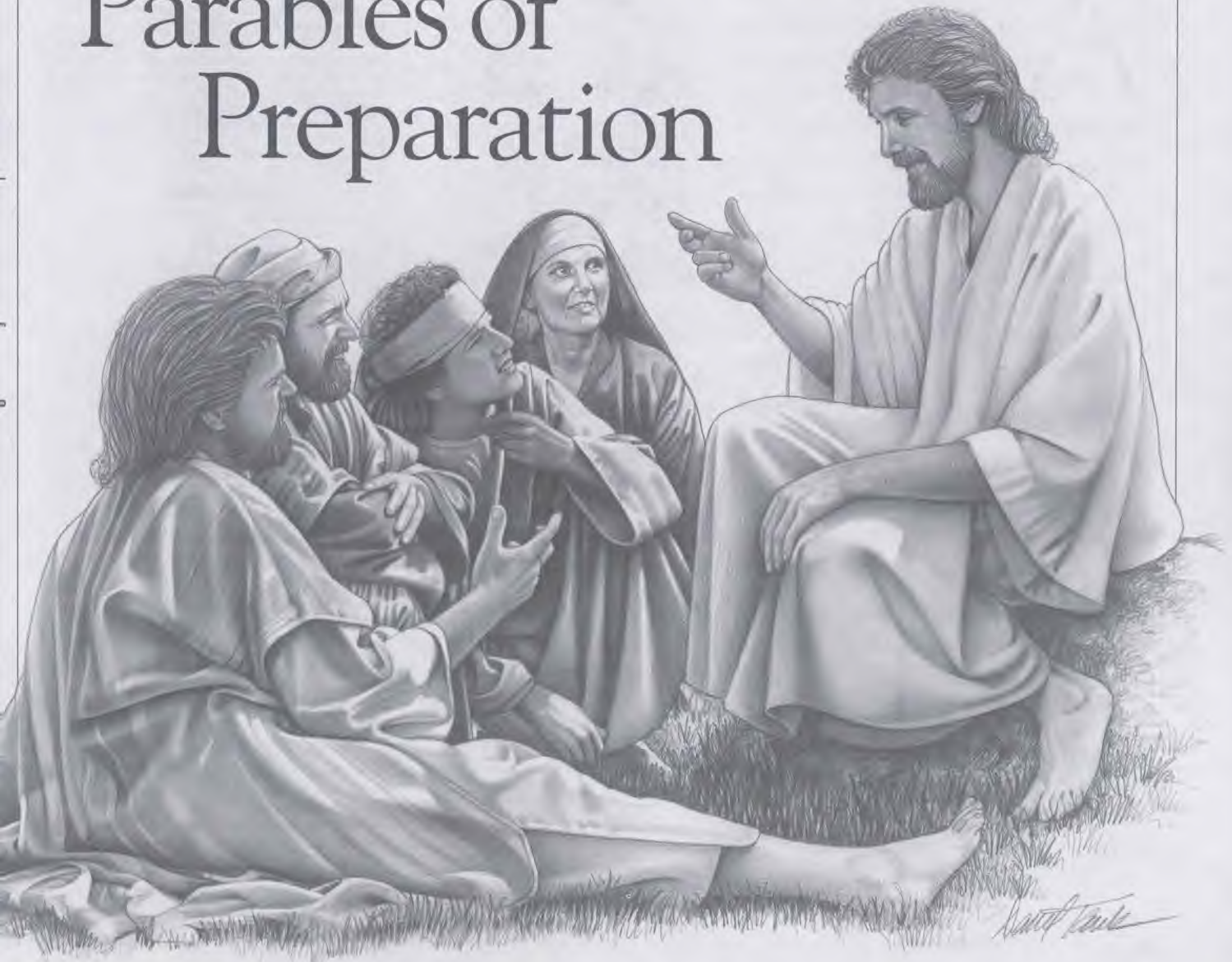


RECORD

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Parables of Preparation



READINGS FOR THE WEEK OF PRAYER, SEPTEMBER 1-8, 1990

Stories Jesus Told About the End

A message from the General Conference officers

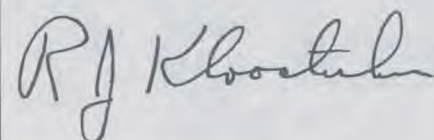
As the hour for earth's momentous rendezvous with its Maker draws nearer, our Lord pleads with His church to respond through total personal preparation and commitment.

The recent 1990 General Conference session highlighted the worldwide challenge to complete the gospel commission. Nearly half the world's population has yet to hear even the name of Jesus. In Indianapolis we as a people committed ourselves to reach the unreached with the clarion call of the three angels' message. Global Strategy has become our challenge.

But that global summons calls for personal dedication. For without personal preparation there can be no successful Global Strategy for finishing the work.

This year's Week of Prayer theme, "Parables of Preparation," appeals to each of us to examine our preparation to meet the Saviour face-to-face. May the Holy Spirit lead us through these daily readings to a more intimate relationship with our coming Lord.

R. J. Kloosterhuis



R. J. Kloosterhuis is a general vice president of the General Conference.



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Any Future in Your Plans?

*We need
immediate, total
commitment to
Jesus Christ.*

BY NEAL C. WILSON

Welcome to the blessings of the 1990 Week of Prayer. Setting aside a week in which to give special time for prayer and spiritual themes by no means suggests that one week out of the year is enough. On the contrary, because we recognize that the things of this world are too much with us, we set aside *this* week in an effort to increase our awareness of our need for

a growing personal relationship with Jesus Christ *every* week.

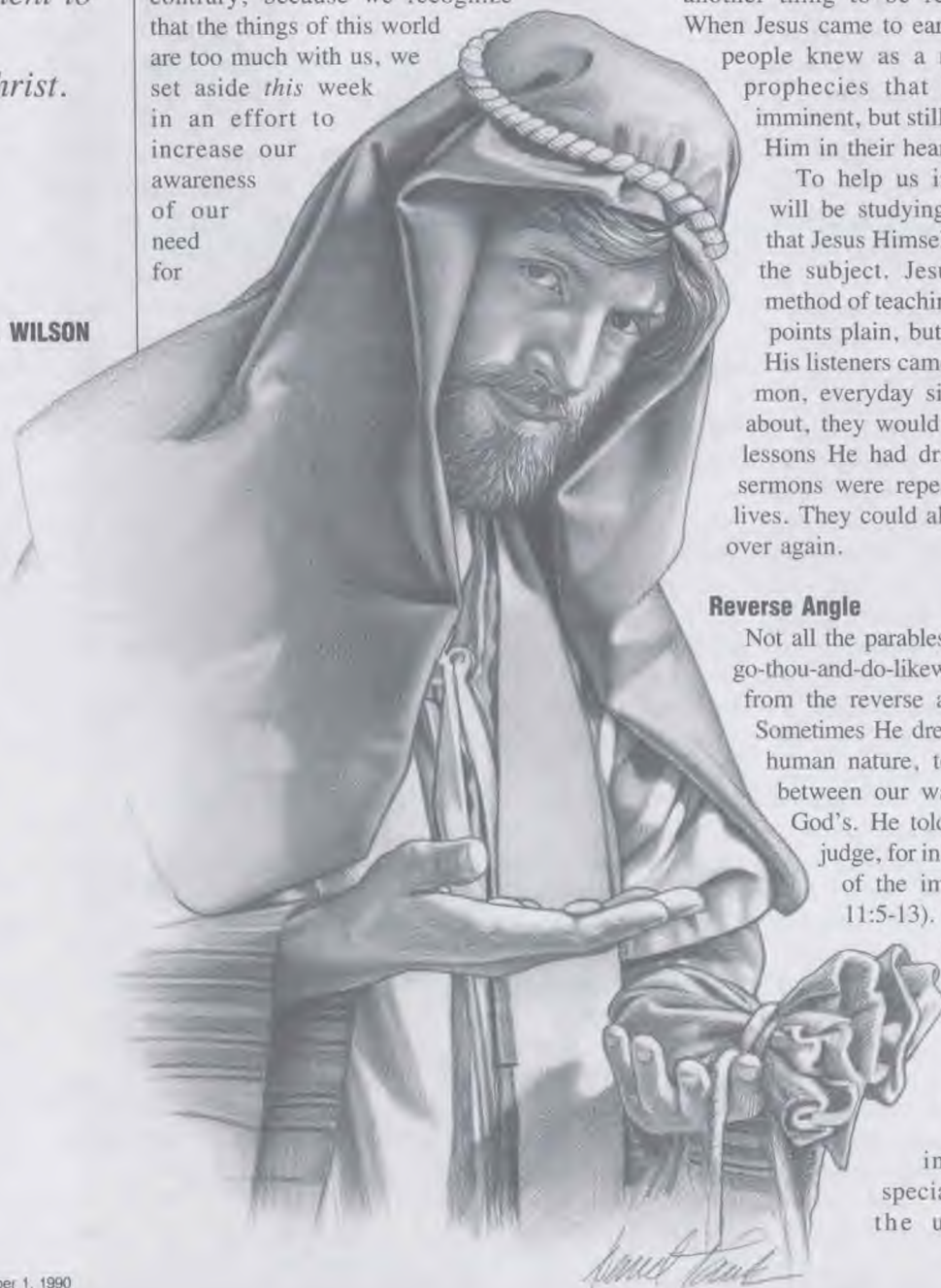
The overall theme of this week's studies is the importance of preparing for Christ's return. It is one thing to know that Jesus is coming, even to believe that He is coming soon; it is another thing to be ready for His coming. When Jesus came to earth the first time, many people knew as a result of studying the prophecies that His appearance was imminent, but still they were not ready for Him in their hearts.

To help us in this preparation, we will be studying some of the parables that Jesus Himself used so effectively on the subject. Jesus used parables as a method of teaching, not only to make His points plain, but also so that every time His listeners came across one of the common, everyday situations that He talked about, they would remember the spiritual lessons He had drawn from it. Thus His sermons were repeated frequently in their lives. They could almost hear His voice all over again.

Reverse Angle

Not all the parables Jesus gave were of the go-thou-and-do-likewise variety. Some were from the reverse angle—what *not* to do. Sometimes He drew lessons from perverse human nature, to illustrate the contrast between our way of doing things and God's. He told the story of the unjust judge, for instance (Luke 18:1-8), and of the importunate friend (Luke 11:5-13). In the parable of the 10 virgins (Matt. 25:1-13), we have examples of both the positive and the negative, what we should do and what we should not do.

The parable I use to introduce this week's special messages is that of the unfaithful steward,



found in Luke 16:1-12. Jesus told this parable primarily for the benefit of His disciples. As was usually the case, other people were present as well. On this occasion both tax collectors and Pharisees, representing the very opposites in social and theological status. Jesus addressed them all with His instruction.

Taking Advantage

Jesus told of a "certain rich man" who had a steward, or manager, looking after his affairs. This manager was in charge of all of his employer's business matters—the buying and selling of goods, inventory control, personnel management, bookkeeping, everything. He had a responsible position, and was probably rewarded accordingly. But word came to the landlord that this man in whom he had placed so much trust was unworthy of that trust. Exactly how he was taking advantage of his employer we are not sure—perhaps he was embezzling, or taking kickbacks, or making under-the-table deals. There are many ways to be crooked, but only one way to be honest.

The landlord called his manager to account. He had enough evidence to fire the man on the spot, but he wanted the man to put his affairs in order first. Perhaps he was too lenient; maybe he should have retained a special investigator and given him power to act. Was the landlord naive in allowing a person of questionable character to straighten out his own books before handing them over to a successor? Or was the landlord really revealing his own ethics and character by showing trust and good faith?

The manager recognized that the situation was critical. Not only was he soon to be out of a job, but his unfaithful activities would probably be known among all the landlords and he could never hope to get another job of a similar nature. He told himself he was not able to do hard, manual labor, and he was too proud to go from the position of managing a large estate to begging. He had only one possibility—he would have to use his wits.

So he settled upon a plan in keeping with his devious nature. He reviewed the accounts receivable list in the ledger and then proceeded to call in all his master's debtors. One by one he asked them if they realized how much they owed the

landlord. Each one was told to change the records to show only a fraction of his real indebtedness. In this way the crooked manager was making his master's debtors indebted to him. When he was out of a job, they would be obligated to return the favor and take him in.

The details of the manager's unethical dealings came back to the landlord's ears. Although he himself was the loser in the situation, he was forced to admit that, by human standards, his manager had put across a shrewd deal.

But now comes the point to the story—the reason Jesus told it. Jesus did not approve of the manager's crookedness

*Are the chief things
in our life leading us
toward heaven or away
from heaven?*

any more than He commended the unjust judge or the five foolish virgins. But that steward did demonstrate an ability to plan for the future through the discreet and diligent use of present opportunities.

There were several moral lessons in Jesus' parable, just as there were several audiences who heard it. The parable was a true story, and the specific incident was familiar to the tax collectors in Jesus' audience. The tax collectors were, as a class, money-grabbers. They were prepared to use any and every means, honest or otherwise, to make a profit. Jesus' parable gave them a startling and deplorable illustration, showing how far on a downward spiral the love of money can take a person.

For the Pharisees there was a different lesson. God had entrusted to the Jewish people a vast storehouse of spiritual blessings and knowledge. They were expected to share these blessings with others, that all the world might be brought into a saving relationship with the Creator God. But they had hoarded these blessings for themselves, just as the

steward in Jesus' parable had appropriated his lord's goods to himself.

But even in their self-centeredness, the Pharisees had made no provision for the future. They were thinking only of the present. Yet they could take a leaf from the lessonbook of the unjust steward. By changing their ways, by thinking of the welfare of others, they could prepare for their own eternal destiny.

Let I might be misunderstood, I must repeat that in this parable Jesus was *not* advocating deceit or underhandedness. He was emphasizing the need for looking ahead, for preparing for the future. If honest businesspeople do it and even crooks do it, why can't "children of the light," citizens of the heavenly kingdom, be just as forward-looking?

Then Jesus made a statement that seems out of character, puzzling to many at first reading. He says, in Luke 16:9, "Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations" (RSV). Bible commentators understand, and Ellen White agrees, that "unrighteous mammon" in this case is not a reference to ill-gotten gains but simply to the kind of money we use on earth as contrasted with spiritual wealth in heaven (see *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 371).

In other words, the money we gain on this earth should be used in such a way as to make God and the angels happy. Then when money becomes useless and everything temporal fails, the angels will gladly receive us into heaven. Jesus goes on to say in verse 12, "If you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon [this world's goods], who will entrust to you the true riches [heavenly blessings]?" (RSV).

Applying the Parable

The lesson of this parable is for all. Life is too solemn to be absorbed in temporal or earthly matters. Where do we find ourselves in this parable? For we are in His audience too. Perhaps we might be considered a combination of all three groups of Jesus' original audience: the tax collectors, too interested in what this present world has to offer; the Pharisees, entrusted with a saving message for the world; and the disciples, who had the privilege of daily communion with their Lord.

This entire parable has to do with preparation for the future. While he had a job, the unjust steward did not think of the future. When the future stared him in the face, he put his best thinking to the matter. The issue was not whether his scheme was improper or even illegal—the point to be made is, *he was thinking ahead!* Jesus says that the saints of the kingdom should be at least as “smart” and concerned about the future as the people of the world.

Most Important Event

The second coming of Jesus is the most important event this world will see. It is unthinkable that we not be ready for it. Our eternal future is far more important than our business future. If we can manage our worldly affairs, we ought to be able to see what is necessary to prepare for heaven and do it.

How easy it is, though, to get things turned around and develop confused priorities. At times we become so wrapped up in “getting ahead” that it seems we lose spiritual perception and judgment. “Those who spend their lives in laying up worldly treasure show less wisdom, less thought and care for their eternal well-being, than did the unjust steward for his earthly support” (*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 372).

We need to remember Jesus' warning against becoming ensnared with the amenities this world offers. In His story of the sower, some of the seed fell among thorns. Jesus said that the thorns represent the “worries and riches and pleasures of this life” (Luke 8:14, NASB) that choke out spiritual considerations. We don't have to be wealthy to fall prey to these temptations. Just wanting to be wealthy, or more to the point, simply devoting too much of our time and interest to temporal matters, ends with the same results.

In essence Jesus asks, “Why spend energy dealing with temporary matters when your eternal destiny is at stake?”

Some mentally agile people may be able to entertain thoughts on more than one topic simultaneously. But it is not possible to *concentrate* on more than one topic at a time, for the word means to focalize, to converge our thoughts. The apostle Paul says, “This one thing I do, . . . I press toward the mark for the prize

of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13, 14).

In the Revelation, the church of Laodicea does not press toward anything. It is satisfied with its current condition. “You are neither cold nor hot. . . . You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing” (Rev. 3:15-17, RSV). It seems unthinkable that such an attitude should exist among the very people who claim to believe that Jesus is coming soon! Surely these people, who see almost all the signs of Christ's coming fulfilled, should be on life's edge—awake, alert, sober, expectant, and prepared. But the angel of Laodicea says that they are lethargic and somnolent.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, a noted preacher of yesteryear in the New York City area, told of a schoolmate who decided to do his homework the “scientific” way. He bought a special desk that would hold his book at just the right angle, a lamp that would illuminate the book properly, eyeshades to block out extraneous light, slippers and jacket to put him in the mood for serious study. This student would come home and adjust his clothes, his light, his eyeshade, his desk, his book—and fall off to sleep. Laodicean!

Denying the Obvious

It is a part of this picture that the very persons who deny being Laodicean are thereby demonstrating the epitome of Laodiceanism. The ones who say “Revival is for someone else; I'm quite ready now, thank you” are the ones most in need of a revival. So Jesus appeals, “Be zealous and repent.” Repent of your lukewarmness, your self-satisfaction, your readiness to conform to this world. Be zealous—the very opposite of lukewarm. Be on fire.

A few months ago the Adventist Church held its General Conference session. After hearing reports of the gospel's progress in many parts of the world, the church adopted plans for a global strategy of evangelism. No more a piecemeal approach; the world is our target, and all our resources are dedicated to evangelizing the world. “Days, weeks, and months are passing; and we have one day, one week, one month less in which to do our work. A few more years at the longest and the voice which we cannot

refuse to answer will be heard saying, ‘Give an account of thy stewardship’” (*ibid.*, pp. 373, 374).

Will you make a commitment, or a recommendation, to God today? Don't put it off until the end of the week, or the end of the day. Count the cost: are the chief things in your life—that is, the things you care about the most—leading you toward heaven or away from heaven? If your life were to continue as it is now, where would it end up?

The apostle Paul made the following appeal to the church at Colossae—and certainly to us: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. . . . Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. . . . Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience. . . . And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. . . . And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:1-17, RSV).

That last sentence sums up the whole matter: “Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” If we make that kind of commitment, the things of this earth will grow strangely dim. When we make that one commitment, Christ first and last and best, then everything else will take its rightful place—and we will take our rightful place, which is by the side of Jesus, now and for eternity.

Questions for Discussion

1. Explain Luke 16:8—“The lord commended the unjust steward.” Who is “the lord” here?
2. How much of our money belongs to God, and how much to ourselves?
3. Apply the lessons of the parable of the unjust steward to (a) the church; (b) your life personally.



Neal C. Wilson is president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Tired of Waiting?

*The apparent
delay tests
our mettle.*

"Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But if that evil slave says in his heart, 'My master is not coming for a long time,' and shall begin to beat his fellow-slaves and eat and drink with drunkards; the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, and shall cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; weeping shall be there and the gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 24:45-51, NASB).

The second coming of Christ has been on the lips of Christians for nearly two millennia. Although a casual reading of the Gospels alerts the reader to the fact that Jesus dealt much more with practical, everyday living than with His return, yet it is a prominent theme in the New Testament.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church herself teaches the arrival of both "the time of the end" (beginning in 1798 at the close of the 1260 years of medieval persecutions) and the pre-Advent judgment (beginning in 1844 at the close of the 2300-year prophecy of Daniel 8:14). These are valid prophetic waymarks that clearly show where we are in the stream of time. But beyond these prophetic markers some zealous members have at times succumbed to the temptation to declare a more or less definite time for the Advent.

Since the human personality can sustain excitement and hope at its height for only a limited span, such attempts and failures bring discouragement. This is not to say that the church should not proclaim the Second Advent. But we would do well to avoid using time pressure to motivate members to "get ready." Instead, we might better emphasize ways that Christians can grow up into Jesus Christ and become mature, productive human beings.

In 1851 Ellen White wrote: "The Lord showed me that the message must go, and that it must not be hung on time; for time will never be a test

again. I saw that some were getting a false excitement, arising from preaching time, that the third angel's message can stand on its own foundation, and that it needs not time to strengthen it." And in 1892: "We are not to live upon time excitement. We are not to be engrossed with speculations in regard to the times and the seasons which God has not revealed. Jesus has told His disciples to 'watch,' but not for a definite time" (*Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 188, 189).

The doctrine of the Second Coming sometimes has been unwittingly abused. The beautiful teaching has been spoken to the grieving as though this hope should cause the pain and sorrow they are experiencing to vanish immediately. Some suggest that one does not express sorrow in light of the soon-coming Saviour. As parents and teachers, we may have been guilty of misusing the promise of the return of our Lord to scare young people into submitting to behaviors that we deem essential for salvation.

Not to Worry

By far the worst use made of the doctrine of the Second Coming occurs when, instead of teaching people how to cope with their distresses and anxieties in the present, we assure them only that the Lord is coming soon, and they will not have to worry about these problems anymore. Pie-in-the-sky theology gives us neither coping techniques nor a sense of our present reality. And fear-motivated Christians sometimes give up in favor of other pursuits or movements that will help them forget their present distress.

The doctrine of the Second Coming is to bring joy, not sorrow; a ray of hope, not gloom; a positive good, not a negative experience; peace, not distress. It is a precious conviction that God is in control and all is well with our souls.

The Scripture passage chosen for today's reading, Matthew 24:45-51, includes enlightening information for those who question, "Where is the promise of His coming?" It deals with a slave of the first century. Slaves of that era were not rewarded for merely doing their duty. Some slaves, because of their integrity and faithful stewardship, were given positions over other household

slaves. However, they were still slaves and were expected to perform their duties with dispatch.

The slave in the parable appears to covet the highest position—ruler over all the master's goods. To be in charge of the expenditures and incomes gives the slave virtual control over the estate. He is motivated by position and power. When the master returns, he will be promoted. But the master delays, or so the slave imagines, and the coveted position is not yet in sight.

Although this slave appeared to be successful and promising, the delay in his master's return and the unfulfilled promise of promotion only motivated the slave to show his true self. His drunken behavior began to demonstrate that he was concerned not for the master of the household, but only for himself. He did not care for his fellow slaves: in fact, the parable records his cruelty to them.

Choosing Freedom

Slaves in the first century were not all treated alike. Some household slaves received not only room and board, education, hospitalization, and burial sites, but also a certain sum that could enable them to buy their freedom. In other words, slaves of the first century could eventually leave their master's household if they chose, and the way was open to them to exercise that choice.

However, if a slave became cruel to other slaves and did not perform his assigned duties in the master's household, it was clear to all that this slave was incompatible with the household. He could be sold to another master. For the most part, slaves were treated with respect by their masters and were made to feel they belonged to the household.

The slave who reasons "My master is not coming for a long time" sounds an urgent warning for Seventh-day Adventists. We often have believed that God's time schedule is the same as ours, and therefore have difficulty understanding why Christ has not yet returned. We assume that God has had sufficient time to finish the judgment. And because we do not understand the providential ways of God, some of us have grown discontented and discouraged. The doubt has at times been exacerbated by unwise zealots who propose new time frames whenever a new

*We are to live our
daily lives in faithfulness
and integrity as we
await the Advent.*

war or a catastrophic natural phenomenon occurs—only to see them fail.

Matthew's parable is for us today. The slave had only to prepare the food for the household. That simple, mundane task was a necessary, daily duty. It represents our daily lives; the necessary tasks of earning a living, taking care of our families, and living as compassionate Christians. In a sense, the parable means that we are to live our daily lives with faithfulness and integrity. The parable never tells us how long the master stays away, nor is that point important to the thrust of the parable.

We cannot scare either ourselves or the world into repentance by proclaiming a specific time for the Second Coming. To conjecture the time of Christ's return, no matter how inviting, does not produce the hoped-for results. To go about the business of the master's household demonstrates that we are faithful servants. We have our Master's gospel commission to perform (Matt. 28:19, 20), and as we cheerfully discharge our calling, we are to "wait for [God's] Son from heaven" with patience (1 Thess. 1:10).

Matthew's admonition to "be on the alert" suggests that we should evaluate our reasons for believing in an imminent Second Coming. Do we primarily hope that we will escape having to die? Do we think we will be rescued from having to cope in a difficult world? Do we hope that we can avoid learning to grow up emotionally and mentally? If so, we shall be sadly disappointed.

The hope of the Second Coming of our Saviour, genuinely held, does not turn us away from the challenges of this present life and from being caring, uplifting persons. Let us, therefore, take seriously the meaning of the parable. As Christians we have the Lord's household to care

for—the world family. Let us cease trying to make God's schedule fit into our time frame. We have a blessed hope; let us not turn it into a dismal disappointment. And since the word *delay* really describes our disappointment and discouragement, rather than God's time schedule, let us resist using it in reference to the Second Coming.

We can have no clear-cut cause-and-effect understanding of the way God operates in our world. The universe has far too many intricacies beyond our ken. Biblical writers give a bare outline of events and prophecies, with frequent and wide time gaps between. Since God did not see fit to fill in these specifics, let us beware of doing so.

The faithless servant tried to estimate the time of his master's arrival. Shall we say *he* filled in the specifics, and his own concept of what constituted a reasonable time segment for a journey?

The parable shows that behavior based on the hope of reward or threatened calamities is not an accurate expression of our true selves. When the reward for which the behavior is exhibited does not materialize, we drop the behavior in favor of deportment that is consistent with the real self.

Since God wisely has not seen fit to give us the exact date of the second appearing of our Lord and Saviour, we would do well to follow the Old Testament advice: "Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the Lord" (Ps. 27:14, NASB).

Questions for Discussion

1. How can we avoid becoming burned out in the hope of the Second Coming?
2. Why has God not seen fit to give us the exact date for our Lord's return?
3. The author suggests we should avoid using the term *delay* with reference to the Second Coming. Why does she say this? Do you agree?
4. What is the best way(s) to await Jesus' return?



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Using What We Have

The parable of the talents tells us of a generous lover.

Read: Matt. 25: 14-30

It sounds like bragging, doesn't it? The first servant replied, "What have I been doing? Well, you gave me five and I gained five more." The second servant likewise reported, "You gave me two and I made two more." It's as though these two men came to their master and wanted him to notice their achievements. "Look what we have done. Aren't you proud of us?"

But that isn't really what happened.

The story is this: A man leaving on a journey entrusts his assets to his most loyal servants. He simply divided his wealth among them. He did not tell them that he was returning. He did not tell them to invest the money. He did not tell them they were going to be judged by what they did with what he gave them. He did not tell them he wanted the money when he returned.

Yet somehow they knew these things. Maybe it was implied in the "greater" master giving his assets to the "lesser" servants. Maybe it was because they knew his personality and what his gifts implied.

When he returned they were prepared to give back what he had given. The first servant returned his five talents with five more. The master was pleased. The next servant returned two extra talents with the two the master had given. The commendation "well done" rang in their ears.

The third servant, however, returned only one talent. He had not done anything with what the master had left him. The master was displeased—not simply because he needed the return on his money, but because this servant, out of fear, had done nothing.

So the master gave his talent to the one with 10 and fired this third servant. He could not accept service from someone who was afraid of him.

Context of Judgment

As Jesus told this story, He placed it in the context of judgment and readiness. He was telling us that we do not know when the judgment will take place, so we must be ready. Then He explained how we are to be ready. He reminds us

to *be* ready, not *get* ready. Getting ready is for non-Christians. Those who do not know Christ and His salvation need to *get* ready. But Christians who know their source of salvation are instructed to *be* ready, implying a state of readiness. Colossians 1:12 speaks about "the Father, who has *qualified* us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light" (RSV).

This does not imply neglect or lethargy. On the contrary, we are invigorated with joy at the realization of our future—a future assured in the Father and the Son through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Because of this we allow God to finish the work He began in us at our conversion. Our characters are transformed, sin is attacked and overcome at its source, and love is expressed in and through our actions and reactions.

Picture of a Slave

Jesus uses three word pictures in this story to convey the truth He sought to teach. The first picture He paints is of a servant. Actually, this person is a bondsman. He is owned completely by his master. Whatever else we can imagine about being a slave, the most fundamental aspect of all is simply this: a slave is powerless.

And perhaps this is the fundamental point of Jesus' story. These three slaves, though powerless, receive enough wealth to change their lives completely. How they used their wealth revealed their character.

Some psychologists tell us that one of the basic drives of our humanity is a drive for power. We strive for power because with power we can protect ourselves and our loved ones, and also influence our environment so we can control others. We cannot escape dealing with power. We are either suffering from another person's attempts to gain power, or trying to gain power ourselves.

But being a slave means being powerless. If you and I are depicted in this story, our powerlessness becomes a fundamental principle. It is no wonder that many Christians shy away from the calling of God to service. No one likes to be powerless. Yet this is what is required. A slave has no power of his own, but he does have the master's power at his disposal if he is doing the master's work.

John R. W. Stott on page 106 of his book *The Preacher's Portrait* says that "the first step toward such an endowment with power is the humble acknowledgment of our lack of it." "We need power," he writes, "not only in our lives, but in our ministry. We shall never begin to seek the power of God until we have come to see the futility of attempting to proclaim God's Word in man's weakness alone."

Message of the Talents

The second picture Jesus paints is that of the talents. However we calculate the amount of money given, we are aware that even one talent was far more than the slaves had ever had in their possession before. The master was truly a gracious owner. He gave to each an amount that far exceeded his wildest imaginations.

Likewise, as God shares talents with us, He bestows and recognizes the whole breadth of talents and abilities that each believer may develop. And each one of us can share in the excitement about a God who gives to us something that far exceeds our most farfetched dreams. Without Him giving us talents, we would have nothing of value ourselves. If we add our valuelessness to our powerlessness, we can begin to understand the state of a slave.

But for the Christian, there is a difference. Our Master is generous, gracious, and so knowledgeable that He gives us according to what would make us most happy and complete. To some He gives five talents; to others, He gives two; and to some He gives one. But whatever He gives makes us incredibly happy—or at least it should.

Portrait of the Master

The important picture here is that of the Master. Too often we see authority as an elected or appointed office. Our "masters" tend to be human beings who somehow have authority over us. This is not biblical. Who possesses authority, according to the Bible? Who is "master"? According to Scripture, you and I don't have authority. There's only one Authority, Jesus Christ.

We are slaves born without power or value. It is the Master who gives us both power and value. Our problem is the difficulty we have knowing how to allow Him

to be the head of everything. Mistakenly thinking He has appointed us head, we attempt to conduct our ministries by our own gifts and abilities. What we are called to do, however, is to submit to Him, realizing that the talents we have are His talents. The gifts we have are His.

When we understand this principle, we begin to understand true freedom. As Jesus tells of the slaves' response to His largess, we see freedom in action. The first two slaves report to the Master in terms that at first sound like bragging: "You gave me five talents. You gave me two talents. And look what we have done with them. We have doubled them." Did they actually double them? No. Because only God gives increase. Then why their exuberant report? They knew their Master would be pleased.

Sharing Good News

Do you remember the time you shared good news with your parents or someone significant in your life? Maybe it was a first-grade report, or an accomplishment in sports, or entrance into a university. Your joy would be enhanced only if your parents or friends could join with you. And as you shared with them your good fortune, their smiles gave proof that you were valued and that everyone was entering into your joy.

These two slaves felt the same way toward their Master. They knew they could share their excitement over the increase with Him because they knew He would smile with approval and join with them in a celebration. All heaven would unite in their joy. Christ's highest joy is to have His people share His glory (see *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 20, 21).

But the third slave never knew this freedom. He hid his talent in the ground with these words: "And I was afraid" (Matt. 25:25). He felt he could not share his excitement with the Master. Fear of failure and fear of the Master kept him from receiving the joy of talents used in the Master's service.

Fear is the greatest inhibitor of service found on earth. God bountifully provides us with gifts and abilities. But to the extent that we are afraid or uncertain of Him, we fail in using those abilities and gifts. We may understand that as Christians we are called to use our gifts as bridges to all segments of our society.

We may understand that all we have comes from God. We may recognize Jesus as lord and master. We may have many gifts, more than just one or two. We may know that we are not to remain idle while awaiting Christ's return. We may recognize that there are individuals that God has placed in our sphere of influence that we can reach for Christ more easily than anyone else can. But if we have fear, we will hide ourselves and refuse to risk, for fear of failure.

The call to do something with our talents and gifts is first a call to know the Master. This is why Jesus kept saying throughout His ministry that if you knew the truth, the truth would "set you free" (John 8:32, NIV). Again and again, Jesus tells His followers: "Fear not." And in 1 John 4:18 we are reminded that "perfect love casts out fear" (RSV).

The revolution of service and revival waiting to happen is based upon the pursuit of truth—the truth that as slaves we are powerless and "valueless." It is God who gives us different gifts and abilities, based upon His own power and value. A smiling, excited God eagerly waits for us to share His joy.

Need something to do? First, pursue the truth about God with renewed vigor and determination. Then He will give you gifts and talents around which a revolution of service can be accomplished.

Questions for Discussion

1. What really was the problem of the third servant? Was his master justified in being wroth with him? Why?
2. What spiritual lesson does the author draw from the social condition of slaves in the first century?
3. What picture of God emerges from this parable?



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Sheep and Goats

The caring
church
ministers
to the
down-and-out.

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left" (Matt. 25:31-33, NIV).

We stood on a hill looking out over the city of Jerusalem. The sight took our breath away, and stories of kings, prophets, disciples, and of Jesus our Lord rushed through our minds.

Removed from the clamor of the city, with no noises to distract our rapt attention, we stood silent in the sunny coolness of a December morning, absorbed in private reflection.

Then, faintly at first, the tinkle of a distant bell grew louder and louder. We couldn't find the source of the sound until a flock of sheep approached, several of which had bells tied to their necks. A shepherd was taking them to pasture.

We'd seen several flocks of sheep in recent days, but from a greater distance. Up close we discovered that these were large sheep, with longer backs and legs than those we'd seen in North America. Most of them were white with dark or black heads. Their wool was long too, and they looked as if someone had draped a blanket of long hair over them.

Then we saw two or three in the group that looked a little different from the rest. They were darker overall, a bit taller, and their "wool" was stringier. Their ears were slightly longer too, but hung down along their heads, difficult to notice from a distance. They were goats—goats in the flock with the sheep. But to our untrained eyes they looked nearly the same.

They passed us at a brisk walk, and as quickly as they had come, they were gone. But they left a lasting memory and a new way to contemplate the sheep and goats of Jesus' parable.

Sheep and goats play a central part in today's verses. They symbolize the good and the bad, the righteous and the wicked, the redeemed and the cursed.

Why did Christ choose these as examples for this story? Is there anything in the nature of the animals themselves that makes them particularly suitable for His message?

Choices

First, let's look at the context of this story to see what Jesus was trying to teach. *Read the entire parable, Matthew 25:31-46.*

Today's reading is part of Jesus' final teaching sequence in Jerusalem during Crucifixion week. His life had been controversial and divisive. While many were anxious for the Messiah to come, few were prepared to accept the kind of Messiah Jesus was. They had seen His miracles, listened to His teaching, and recognized His charisma. But they were hesitant to make the choice to let Him be their Lord.

Matthew pictures Jesus in the Temple preaching decision-making messages. This was the time for testing truths and heart-searching appeals. Matthew 25 begins with the parable of the 10 virgins and continues with the parable of the talents. These stories do not provide more information about the Messiah—they simply assume that all the necessary data are in. Instead, they emphasize the importance of acting on that information: making a choice and living by it. The message of these parables was Jesus' altar call.

The Nature of the Beasts

Is there something in the nature of sheep and goats that reinforces a call to commitment and a life of service?

The first thing to note is that goats are not all bad. Even in Scripture they both provide and represent things that are good. Curtains of goat hair protected the wilderness tabernacle, and male goats were used as sacrifices. Goat meat was popular in those ancient days, and sometimes used as a meal for important guests (Gideon and Manoah both offered it to angels, for example). Goat's milk was used as a drink, its skin as containers, and its hair woven into tent cloth. Yes, goats were valuable.

Why, then, do they so often symbolize the bad, while sheep are associated with the good?

After church one Sabbath, I asked a member who raises goats to compare them with sheep. She called her farmer husband over to join us, and neither had difficulty describing the contrast.

Sheep, they said, are friendly. They form relationships and make excellent pets. They're gentle and kind to one another as well as to other animals and people. They explained my only childhood run-in with a flock of sheep (a ram chased me up onto a tree stump!) as a rare occurrence. For the most part, they said, especially with those people to whom they are attached, sheep are devoted and loyal. "Look at how they follow a shepherd," they reminded me.

When hungry sheep see better grass on the other side of a weak fence, they will push and squeeze through. Goats, on the other hand, will break down, climb, or jump fences even if they aren't hungry! Goats are flighty, stubborn, and aloof. They make few friends. Seldom do they make good pets unless you acquire them when they're very young and maintain a continuing attachment to them. Goats are independent, unruly, selfish, and wayward. They're mean to each other, pick fights, push others away from food or fun, and seem to enjoy tormenting those weaker than themselves.

Now, when the kinds of sheep and goats we saw in Palestine were all together, they looked very much alike. From a distance it was difficult to tell the difference. But the shepherd who raised and watched them, cared for and protected them, was never confused. No matter how similar they looked, he could easily tell them apart by the way they treated one another.

Basis of Judgment

Well! That helped me understand why Jesus chose goats to be the bad guys in His story and why Matthew, in particular, would have remembered it. Matthew was an advocate for the weak, the helpless, the outcasts of society. Over and over he told stories of Jesus' kindness toward children, adulterers, lepers, women, and tax collectors. All of these groups were looked down on by the Jewish culture of Christ's day. As a tax collector Matthew knew what it was like to be picked on, rejected, chased away, and shunned.

Jesus, however, startled His contemporaries by reaching out to those very groups. He didn't worry about what people looked like or to what group they belonged. He was much more concerned about how they acted toward one another.

And that's the point of this story. In the end, we'll be judged not on how pure our doctrine is, but on how caring and compassionate we are. This is fundamental. It is not enough to have convictions. We must also act on them with caring and compassion. While priding ourselves in our soundness of doctrine, we have sometimes neglected the giving

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of personal kindness. We must learn to share from the heart, and not just from the head.

Surely, intellectual commitment or doctrinal orthodoxy are not enough. It is, rather, the way we live out our doctrinal beliefs that determines our earthly value and our eternal destiny. That's the message of the story of the sheep and the goats.

Isn't it interesting that neither group recognized the eternal consequences of their behavior? Neither those who ministered to the needy nor those who did not realized that what they did (or did not do) day by day had any connection with the King of the universe.

There's a lesson here for us. Every opportunity for human service has divine connotations and eternal consequences. The apparently mundane ministry to the neglected and unnoticed may get little earthly press, but it does not go unnoticed in heaven. That ought to give us cause for serious personal and institu-

tional examination. "The Caring Church" must be more than a slogan. It rests on solid theological underpinnings.

Sheep or Goats?

So what can we do to make certain we are sheep, and not goats? No long lists of do's and don'ts are necessary—they only make us more rigid, more judgmental, more legalistic, and *less* friendly and compassionate.

What we need is to let it happen. A friendly and compassionate lifestyle must come naturally—from the core of our belief and value system. It cannot be studied, analyzed, promoted, or memorized, or it will lose its selfless charm.

Opportunities for service are litmus tests of our religion. Each occasion tries the truthfulness of our doctrines and the consistency of our lives. For that reason, the needy are landmarks on our journey, not interruptions to our progress.

Let us treasure *people* as the heart of God's value system. All the right doctrine in the world would not rank higher than the worth of one person. People are the center of the plan of salvation, and Jesus reinforced that dictum in this story of the sheep and the goats. When we capture the reality of this truth and put it to practice in our daily lives, we will have really become the caring church.

Questions for Discussion

1. The author points to some of the natural qualities of sheep and goats as reasons that Jesus used these animals in His parable. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. What can we learn from the fact that both groups represented expressed surprise over the king's assessment of their behavior?
3. Do you see any conflict between this parable and the doctrine of righteousness by faith? If so, why? If not, why not?



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Hypocrites in the Church



This good farmer keeps at it all day long, and when night comes, his sleep is sound and sweet like the laboring man that Solomon talks about. But there is an enemy abroad. He's stealthy and malicious. He scatters tares, weeds, everywhere. But nobody notices it, because most seeds look alike. Who could tell what kind of seed it is when it's broadcast over a big field? You have to wait until the plants come up. It was then that the hired hands discovered the worst—tares among the wheat. Noxious weeds. This is bad news. This is big trouble.

Breathlessly the helpers rush to tell their master.

"Look, we see weeds everywhere in the field. You planted only wheat. Good seed. Where did all these weeds come from?" It is almost as if he knew already. He didn't seem to be excited about this bad news, nor overly anxious. "Suppose," the helpers said, "we go through the field and pull up all these tares. Get rid of them. How would that be?"

Let Them Grow

"No," says the owner, "don't do that. The wheat is just peeping up. The roots are not too deep yet, and you might uproot the good plants. They are so close to each other, you see. It is better to let them grow together until harvesttime. Then I will send the reapers out to gather the crop. They will get the tares first and burn them. And then they'll get the wheat and put it in my barn. In time there will be a separation of the good and the bad."

Then Jesus says, "Here's a story for you fishermen. You've seen them throw out their nets and draw them in—those big dragnets. They catch every kind of fish. And when they get the catch

*The parables of
the tares and the
dragnet address
a puzzling
situation in the
church today.*

Read: Tares: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, NIV
Dragnet: Matthew 13:47-49, NIV

The parables are pictures of the kingdom. All these stories have tremendous eye appeal. At the same time, Jesus' illustrations are simple and unadorned. There are no fantastic exaggerations here like the riddles and conundrums that rabbis and teachers used in His day. Mostly they were trying to show themselves clever. Jesus' teaching stands out as different from that of the scribes and Pharisees. No one ever taught the way He did. He chose those familiar things that ordinary people could identify with.

But don't get the idea that parables are just bedtime stories with a moral or two thrown in here and there. The teachings found here are so profound and full of meaning that even His most sophisticated hearers were challenged.

Who among His audience had not seen the farmer with his basket of seeds, scattering them back and forth over the field? As He talks, familiar scenes arise. People can see it and are drawn into the story.

**BY CHARLES
E. BRADFORD**

to shore they take their time. In fact, the fishermen sit down. They separate the good fish into containers or big buckets. But notice, they throw the bad ones away. This is the way the kingdom of heaven is. For a time the good and bad are all together, but there will be a separation."

What is Jesus trying to tell us here? Much more, I am sure, than we can cover in one brief Week of Prayer reading or even in a series of sermons. But let's try to get the main points—the essential teaching.

I think first of all that He's talking about the nature of sin and evil, how widespread it is, how pervasive it is. "An enemy did this" (Matt. 13:28, NIV). This enemy is the devil. In plain and simple language Jesus is telling us that Satan is the originator of evil. He is the father of lies, the original sower of all deception. His career began, of all places, in heaven, in the precincts of glory, where he sowed his first baleful seeds. Now he has set up his headquarters on Planet Earth and continues his sowing. He is an intruder, a deceiver "who leads the whole world astray" (Rev. 12:9, NIV). Deception and lies are his stock-in-trade.

The Saviour is trying to tell us that we should not be surprised to find Satan's seeds everywhere, even in the church. Jesus is speaking more specifically about the church: "But we must understand this as signifying the church of Christ in the world. The parable is a description of that which pertains to the kingdom of God, His work of salvation of men; and this work is accomplished through the church" (*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 70). The parable of the big net speaks to this issue also. Both good and bad are gathered in—gathered in to the church, that is.

Sin in the Church

The presence of sin in the church is a reality that most of us find hard to handle. It's so perplexing, so distressing. We thought that the church would be a haven, a refuge, a shelter, an escape from the evil that is so evident in the world. And then to our surprise we discover there are sinners in the church. There are hypocrites in Zion. We want to live right. We want to please God. And

we want the church to be right. What to do?

The hired hands thought they had the answer. "Let's go out and uproot the tares. Clean the field. Rid it of all those poisonous weeds." But the master said, "No, that's not the way to do it. Let them grow together."

"But Master, that is so difficult. What will people think when they see that there is evil in the church? Shouldn't the church be pure and holy, free from all errors and defects of character?"

"Yes, it should," the master said,

*God and angels are the
separators. We cannot do
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enough nor wise enough.*

"but this is not your work. It is the work of the harvesters, the angels, the real reapers. You would make mistakes in trying to get rid of the weeds." And this is what I actually did when trying to help my wife with her flower garden. I thought I was weeding it, but I was also destroying some of her precious plants, and all of my good intentions couldn't bring those plants back.

"Christ has plainly taught that those who persist in open sin must be separated from the church, but He has not committed to us the work of judging character and motive. He knows our nature too well to entrust this work to us. Should we try to uproot from the church those whom we suppose to be spurious Christians, we should be sure to make mistakes. Often we regard as hopeless subjects the very ones whom Christ is drawing to Himself. . . . Man judges from appearance, but God judges the heart. The tares and the wheat are to grow together until the harvest; and the harvest is the end of probationary time" (*ibid.*, pp. 71, 72).

The church is a voluntary organization. Whosoever will, let him come. Ev-

ery one of us comes unworthy. We have our faults and failures. There are motes and even sometimes beams in our eyes. We are not really worthy to judge anyone. But some say we must not be soft on sin. True. But we should begin first with ourselves. We should deal most severely with the sin that crops up in our own hearts.

The church is also a social organization. There is networking and association here. "As the tares have their roots closely intertwined with those of the good grain, so false brethren in the church may be closely linked with true disciples. The real character of these pretended believers is not fully manifested. Were they to be separated from the church, others might be caused to stumble, who but for this would have remained steadfast" (*ibid.*, p. 72).

Jesus is speaking now specifically to the matter of church discipline, making it clear that "the tares could not be plucked up without danger of uprooting the precious grain" (*ibid.*).

We need to learn more about church discipline. We need to understand the difference between open sin and character defects. We need to understand how to discern between the sin that is not unto death and the sin that is unto death. People should be severed from the church only when they are "dead." But if there is some spark of life, church members should at least be as concerned as health-care professionals who work hard to save the patient who has the faintest spark of life left. "Not judgment and condemnation of others, but humility and distrust of self, is the teaching of Christ's parable" (*ibid.*, p. 74).

Judgment

These two parables, the tares and the dragnet, assure us that there will be a final separation. There will be a judgment at the end of the age, in the time of harvest. There will be an ultimate separation of the wicked and the righteous. The Saviour does not teach us that the time is coming when tares will become wheat. He does say that there is coming a time when there will be no tares among the wheat because they will be bound in bundles, cast out, and burned.

And you can see the fishermen sitting down, separating the good fish and the

bad fish, putting the good fish into big containers and throwing the bad ones out on the shore. Separation is the point here. God and angels are the separators. We cannot do it. We are neither good enough nor wise enough.

Seventh-day Adventists teach that there will be a judgment. A judgment in which every act, every word, every secret thought, will be brought under the divine scrutiny—heaven's X-ray. Nothing can escape this review. Accounts have been kept. The record is accurate. God and His witnesses, the angels, have seen it all. As the old spiritual has it: "My God is writing all the time. He sees all you do and He hears all you say. My God is writing all the time."

This is the solemn word that we must bear to the world. This is the solemn reality by which we must be guided in our homes, in our church relationships, as we interface with that big wide world out there—our neighborhoods, the workplace.

People are so impressed by outward appearances. Seventh-day Adventist Christians must not be enamored with the outward trappings of modern society—attainment, status, wealth. We must not be enamored with the lifestyles of the rich and famous. We are followers of the humble Galilean. We must come to know what is genuine, what is real, what is lasting. It is character that we are talking about, and characters grow from seed.

Sow a thought, reap an act;
Sow an act, reap a habit;
Sow a habit, reap a character.

The harvest is revealed in a fully developed character—fixed, indelible, irreversible. "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still" (Rev. 22:11). "The harvest is the end of the world" (Matt. 13:39).

Harvesttime

Meanwhile, the harvest is ripening. In fact, two harvests are ripening. One is the harvest of righteousness in the hearts of the sons and daughters of God. The other is the harvest of iniquity, sin's baleful fruit, that ripens in the hearts of rebellious sons and daughters of the "evil empire."

"Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, 'Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.' So he that was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested.

"Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, 'Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the

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earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe.' The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes, and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath" (Rev. 14:15-19, NIV).

Good grain versus clusters of poisonous purple grapes. Two harvests. Sobering consideration.

"Christ Himself will decide who are worthy to dwell with the family of heaven. He will judge every man according to his words and his works. Profession is as nothing in the scale. It is character that decides destiny" (*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 74).

There is one further lesson that I believe Jesus would have us learn. The kingdom of God does not come as a result of human efforts—not by observa-

tion, not with outward show. His kingdom is spiritual, at present invisible. It is not dependent on any human organization or activity. We must not equate the church with the kingdom. We are not called to create Utopia, a sinless, perfect society here on earth. That is God's business. We are to preach the gospel and by His grace model the principles of the kingdom.

But until the day of His return, try as we may to eliminate it, there will be sin in the church. We do not countenance it. We preach and teach against it. We maintain that victory is possible, and in our individual lives we have the assurance that sin may be overcome. Nevertheless, the Master teaches that up until the end of the age, the baleful results of the seed-sowing of the enemy will be with us. "Because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold" (Matt. 24:12).

At times the picture does seem bleak. But not to worry, my brothers and sisters. The matter is in our loving Father's hands. He weeds His garden in His own way.

Then what kind of people should we be? "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming." "So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him" (2 Peter 3:11, 14, NIV).

Questions for Discussion

1. What tension do you see between the church's responsibility to root out sin from its midst and the parable of the tares? How can this tension be resolved?
2. How are the parables of the tares and the dragnet related? What major spiritual message should we learn from them?



Before his retirement last July, Charles E. Bradford was president of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

What Is the Payoff?

*Do I get more
if I begin early?*

*The parable of
the laborers.*

For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard" (Matt. 20:1).

The disciples had witnessed Jesus' conversation with the rich young ruler, and his reaction was still fresh in their minds. Sadly he had turned away from Jesus, unable to separate himself from his earthly treasures—which, in his case, stood between him and the kingdom of God.

Against this background Peter's question in Matthew 19:27 takes on special meaning: "Lo, we have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have?" (RSV). In other words, "Lord, we have acted much different from this young man. We have, in fact, given up everything that stood between You and us to follow You. What then shall we have?"

Jesus' Answer

Interestingly, Jesus accepts the question as valid. He does not reject it as being egotistical or selfish. He knows what it means to give up everything for the kingdom of God, even life itself. He understands that man needs a word of comfort in such situations—a future vision to strengthen and sustain him.

And so He answers Peter: "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life" (Matt. 19:28, 29, RSV).

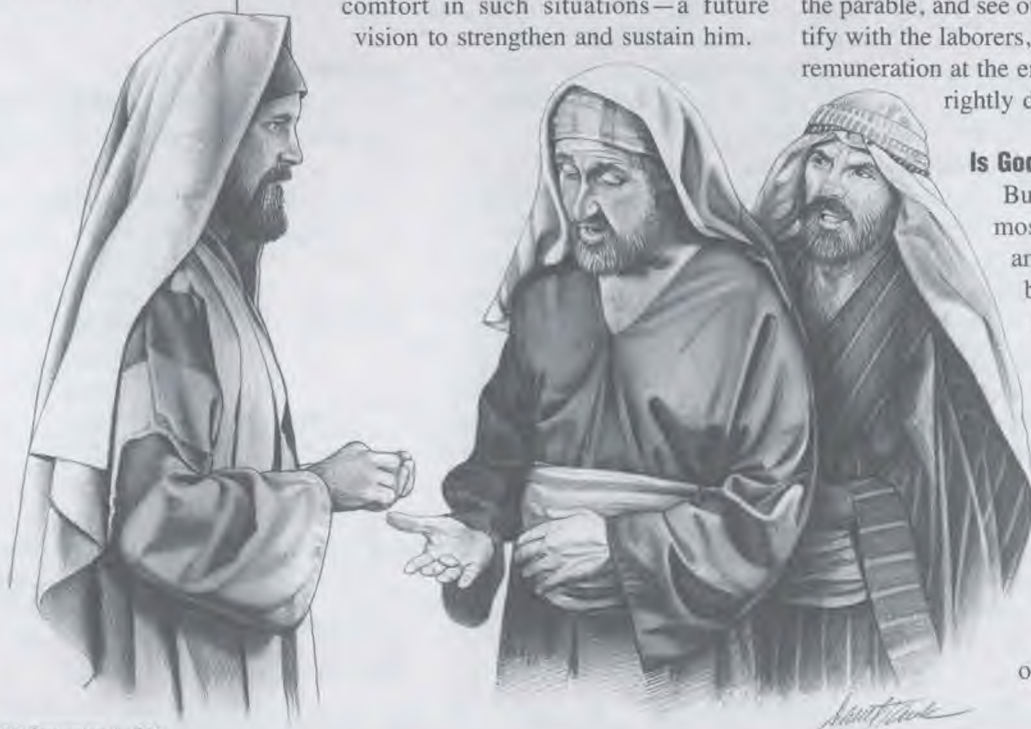
But Jesus adds something that makes Peter and the others listen even more closely: "But many that are first will be last, and the last first" (verse 30, RSV). What does this mean? Does it mean that those who have devoted their entire lives to Christian service will have no advantage over those who slip in at the last moment?

This confusion, reflected on the faces of the disciples, did not escape the notice of Jesus. It forms the basis of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, found in Matthew 20:1-16.* The concepts used in the parable seem familiar to us. It speaks of laborers, of the unemployed looking for jobs, and of contract negotiations—all concepts common to us on a day-to-day basis. From that perspective we can visualize the scenario of the parable, and see ourselves in it. We can identify with the laborers, expecting to receive a just remuneration at the end of the day as something rightly deserved.

Is God Unfair?

But at one time or another most of us experience some ambivalence about this parable, a confusion of sentiments. The method appears to be unfair: the person who worked all day in the vineyard, who endured the burden and heat of the day, seems cheated when compared with those hired at the eleventh hour. The parable must have come as a shock to Peter and the others. Yet, though hard to

BY HARALD KNOTT



understand at first, this is, in reality, the principle of the kingdom.

Take the thief on the cross, for example. He came in at the last hour, so to speak. But yet the whole wealth of redemption became his, just as it had become for those who followed Jesus from the beginning. From a human point of view this seems unfair and unjust. But if we sever ourselves from our human thinking on the question of remuneration and try to view this matter from God's perspective, then it becomes clear to us rather quickly that no one is unfairly treated.

What we need to keep in mind is the actual point of the parable. It is really speaking about the *labor in God's vineyard*. And here what matters first is *service*, not remuneration. And rightly understood, service for God is already a gift, a privilege.

Think, for example, about the deep feelings of happiness, thankfulness, and joy that fill us when we win someone to Christ. Our eyes light up; our faces beam with delight to witness their surrender and baptism in the name of Christ.

What can bring greater inner satisfaction? Is this not already remuneration in the truest sense of the word?

The same can be said of Christian discipleship in general. To be active in this discipleship is likewise a gift and a privilege. The life with Christ is in itself the reward. Special riches are given to us—riches far surpassing any earthly wealth.

At the foundation of it all is the richness of *knowledge*—the knowledge that I am in God's hand, that I have a Father in heaven who loves me, who is interested in me, and who leads me in the right paths. I may not always comprehend the wisdom of His ways, but I can know that if I walk in them, trusting ever in Him, they will eventually prove the best for me. For "we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28, RSV).

Walking With Confidence

With this special knowledge, then, I can walk through life with calmness and confidence, without fear of death or tomorrow. For I can have the assurance that "neither death, nor life, . . . nor

height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (verses 38, 39, RSV).

And there are other riches that come to the early laborers in the vineyard: the certainty of redemption—of being a child of God; the experience of a truly meaningful life; and the sense of worth that comes from the knowledge of being created in God's image.

All this and much more are benefits already in this life from our Christian

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slip in at the last moment?*

discipleship and service. From this angle, those who have already labored in the vineyard earlier in the day indeed have a huge advantage over those who come in at the last hour. How much these latecomers have missed! But there is still joy that they have come at all!

So considered thus, this parable, which at first sight causes some difficulties in interpretation, suddenly becomes clear. We see that there is no privileged class and that no one is unjustly treated. If any have been disadvantaged, it is those who come in during the final hour, missing out on all the privileges enjoyed by those who came in early. But even at the eleventh hour they receive the same blessings as those before them: the rich knowledge of being in God's hand, the experience of a truly meaningful life, and the sense of worth that comes from the knowledge of having been created in God's image. It is in this sense that they actually obtain the same reward with earlier laborers.

And there is something else that is the same for both, the highest gift of all—*eternal life*. It is here that it becomes clear that in the service of God all are equal. For there can be no remuneration greater than eternal life itself. Those who came early cannot ask for more. Those who came in late cannot be given less. Eternal life must be the same for all.

The parable of the laborers helps us to examine our motives for service. Why are you a Christian? Why are you in discipleship with Christ? Why do you labor in His vineyard?

Love should be our motive—love to Jesus, and love to our fellowmen.

If we become fully conscious of this, then our service, our discipleship, will not be shaped by thoughts of remuneration, but rather by the endeavor to show to the Lord our love and thankfulness for that which He has done for us. And if we have, indeed, experienced this same kind of love in our lives, we cannot help passing it on—to everyone we meet.

God seeks men and women who are ready to go into His vineyard. What a privilege will be ours! This alone would be reward enough. Perhaps you have hesitated until now. The day, remember, will soon end. Night is coming. There is not much time left. We should each take hold of the opportunity set before us, saying yes to God. Jesus waits for you because He loves you—and His love, indeed, is sufficient reward!

Questions for Discussion

1. Is it wrong to expect rewards? How did Jesus handle the issue? What evidence of balance do you see?
2. In the view of our author, what specific advantages do earlier laborers have over latecomers?
3. In what are all laborers equal? What does this tell us about salvation?

*This passage is too long to reproduce here. But we advise readers to refresh their minds with the details before proceeding.



Harald Knott is president of the South German Union Conference in the Euro-Africa Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

Dressed for the Occasion?

*Accepting
the invitation
is not enough.*

A recent convert to the Seventh-day Adventist Church from Catholicism, I was excited about my new religion. As the vesper chimes echoed through the valleys, hills, and meadows around Brazil College, I walked toward the cafeteria, where we boys would join the girls for supper and I would experience my first Friday sundown worship.

I noticed that all the students were well dressed and clean. But even though I had showered, I left my good clothes to be worn on Sabbath morning, as I used to do for Sunday Mass. Somewhat puzzled, I was even more surprised when I got to the cafeteria and saw the girls attired in their best. Wearing my daily clothes, I was completely embarrassed!

As soon as the meal was over, all the students formed a large semicircle for sundown worship. And there I was, at the dean's table, no less, right in the middle of the service. When all eyes centered on me, I thought I would die of shame! If I could have sunk through the floor or been ejected from my seat, I would have welcomed it! I learned right away that students put on their best clothes to receive the Sabbath.

Are you properly dressed for the supper of the Lord? In Matthew 22:1-14 Jesus tells of a king who prepared a banquet for his son. He called for guests twice, but no one came. At the second call those invited went so far as to kill the king's emissaries. The king reciprocated by killing them and destroying their village.

When after a third appeal still no guests came, the king invited people off the streets, and the banquet hall was filled. The one condition: everyone must put on a wedding garment provided by the king. One guest who was found without the wedding garment was thrown out of the party.

The First Call

In this beautiful story Jesus depicted the plan of salvation. The first call went to the Jewish nation. The king represents the heavenly Father, the King of the universe. He has made all the preparation necessary for our salvation. Paul says: "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law,

to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal. 4:4, 5, NIV).

"By the marriage is represented the union of humanity with divinity" (*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 307). The salvation experience brings joy, and for this reason is symbolized by a marriage.

In the parable we find another group, the servants. These represent the prophets, apostles, ministers, and all those who are commanded by God to proclaim the message of salvation to the world. Although the Jewish nation was waiting for the Messiah, when He came they did not receive His message. John the Baptist prepared the way of the Lord, but they paid no attention to his message, either. During this first call to the wedding, Christ Himself and His disciples called people to come. But they refused; they paid no attention.

The Second Call

In His mercy and love, the king launches another campaign to find guests for the wedding feast. The servants tell the guests that everything is ready.

The second invitation offers the Bread of Life. God provides the nourishment we need to live as Christians.

Using another figure, Jesus taught that only when connected to the vine can we find the nutrients needed for eternal life. I once watched workers and students at our agriculture school in Manaus, Brazil, graft tomato plants into a native plant called jurubeba. When planted by itself in the Amazon region, a tomato plant will be destroyed by pests. However, when grafted into the jurubeba, it survives and produces delicious tomatoes. The Christian can survive only when grafted into Jesus. Then we can produce fruit for eternal life.

When the second invitation was given, some of the listeners again rejected it, while some not only rejected it, but killed the servants who gave it! What a graphic portrayal of the persecution of the great heralds of truth! These faithful servants paid with their lives for their invitation to come to Jesus.

BY LEO S. RANZOLIN

But why should the invitees kill the messengers? After all, they had received an invitation to a banquet! Many refused because they were too busy. But those who killed the servants were angry, rebellious. In either case, someday there will come a judgment for those who reject God and refuse to come to the banquet.

The Third Call

Ellen White writes that the "third call to the feast represents the giving of the gospel to the Gentiles" (*ibid.*, p. 309).

Two classes of people came to the wedding: those who put on the wedding garment and the man who refused it. "The white raiment is the righteousness of Christ, the wedding garment which Christ alone can give" (*The SDA Bible Commentary*, Ellen G. White Comments, vol. 7, p. 965).

"If you are to sit at Christ's table, and feast on the provisions He has furnished at the marriage supper of the Lamb, you must have a special garment, called the wedding garment, which is the white robe of Christ's righteousness. Everyone who has on this robe is entitled to enter the city of God; and if Jesus had not been very desirous you should have a place in the mansions He has gone to prepare for those who love Him, He would not, at so great an expense to Himself, have made all these arrangements that you might be happy and sit at His table and enjoy the home He has gone to prepare for His redeemed family" (*Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 368).

During the Pan-American Youth Congress in Mexico City in 1984, I had the privilege of making the final call to the 12,000 young people present. I took a white shirt, cut it and soiled it, but left the collar intact. With my coat on, no one could tell what was underneath. I challenged the young people to wear the proper garment to enter into the kingdom of God, to receive the righteousness of Christ into their lives. I took my coat off and revealed my own "unrighteousness," my soiled condition. Then friends covered me with a coat that represented the righteousness of Christ, which can be received only when I accept Him into my life. The promise is there:

"I will clothe you with My own righteousness—the wedding garment—and

make you fit for the marriage supper of the Lamb. When clothed in My righteousness, through prayer, through watchfulness, through diligent study of My Word, you will be able to reach a high standard. You will understand the truth, and your character will be molded by a divine influence; for this is the will of God, even your sanctification" (*The SDA Bible Commentary*, Ellen G. White Comments, vol. 3, p. 1162).

In the parable, Jesus reveals another class of people, represented by the man who came without a wedding garment—those who refuse to receive and wear this character of Jesus.

"How plainly the picture is drawn in the Word of God of His dealing with the man who accepted His invitation to the wedding, but who did not put on the wedding garment which had been purchased for him, the robe of Christ's righteousness. He thought his own defiled garments good enough to come into the presence of Christ, but he was cast out as one who had insulted His Lord and abused His gracious benevolence. My brother, your righteousness will not be sufficient. You must put on the robe of Christ's righteousness. You must be like Christ" (*Testimonies*, vol. 5, pp. 509, 510).

Qualifying for Heaven

All through history we see men trying to supply their own garments, their own righteousness, their own works, to qualify for heaven. It began in the Garden of Eden. When they sinned, our first parents lost the robe of light supplied by their own Creator and tried to cover their deficiency with fig leaves.

When Naaman was told to go to the Jordan River to get rid of his leprosy, he replied, "Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" (2 Kings 5:12, NIV).

Amazingly enough, even today men and women do not want to go to the "Jordan." They prefer their own rivers of science, pride, materialism, and culture instead of the cross of Jesus. "This robe, woven in the loom of heaven, has in it not one thread of human devising. Christ in His humanity wrought out a perfect character, and this character He

offers to impart to us" (*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 311).

What message would God teach His people with this parable? The salvation provided by God for one to be admitted into His kingdom is so simple. All we have to do is accept it, and we will become citizens. "When we submit ourselves to Christ, the heart is united with His heart, the will is merged in His will, the mind becomes one with His mind, the thoughts are brought into captivity to Him; we live His life. This is what it means to be clothed with the garment of His righteousness" (*ibid.*, p. 312).

Jesus came down to show us that we can live the Christian life successfully. "As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:12). "This power is not in the human agent. It is the power of God. When a soul receives Christ, he receives power to live the life of Christ" (*ibid.*, p. 314).

Only those who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb and are wearing the fine, clean, white linen can sit with the King. If they are not wearing His robe, they will be speechless. God need not condemn them; they condemn themselves. This parable represents the investigative judgment, the examination that will determine those who are fit for heaven (see *The Great Controversy*, p. 428).

May God help us not to be found naked or with the wrong garment when God's scrutiny falls upon us.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do the three wedding invitations represent historically?
2. Why is an outer garment used to represent an inner experience?
3. What does it mean to be clothed with Christ's righteousness?
4. Why was the man without a wedding garment rejected?



Leo S. Ranzolin is an associate secretary of the General Conference.

Does Our Light Flicker?

*The parable of
the 10 virgins
tells us
something
about readiness
for the Advent.*

This reading is excerpted from Christ's Object Lessons, pages 405-421. To make for easier reading, long paragraphs in the original have been broken here into two or more.—Editors.

Christ with His disciples is seated upon the Mount of Olives. The sun has set behind the mountains, and the heavens are curtained with the shades of evening. In full view is a dwelling house lighted up brilliantly as if for some festive scene. The light streams from the openings, and an expectant company wait around, indicating that a marriage procession is soon to appear.

In many parts of the East, wedding festivities are held in the evening. The bridegroom goes forth to meet his bride and bring her to his home. By torchlight the bridal party proceed from her father's house to his own, where a feast is provided for the invited guests. In the scene upon which Christ looks, a company are awaiting the appearance of the bridal party, intending to join the procession. . . .

As Christ sat looking upon the party that waited for the bridegroom, He told His disciples the story of the ten virgins, by their experience illustrating the experience of the church that shall live just before His second coming.

Two Classes

The two classes of watchers represent the two classes who profess to be waiting for their Lord. They are called virgins because they profess a pure faith. By the lamps is represented the Word of God. The psalmist says, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Ps. 119:105). The oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. . . .

In the parable, all the ten virgins went out to meet the bridegroom. All had lamps and vessels for oil. For a time there was seen no difference between them. So with the church that lives just before Christ's second coming. All have a knowledge of the Scriptures. All have heard the message of Christ's near approach, and confidently expect His appearing. But as in the parable, so it is now. A time of waiting intervenes, faith is

tried; and when the cry is heard, "Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him," many are unready. They have no oil in their vessels with their lamps. They are destitute of the Holy Spirit.

Without the Spirit of God, a knowledge of His Word is of no avail. The theory of truth, unaccompanied by the Holy Spirit, cannot quicken the soul or sanctify the heart. One may be familiar with the commands and promises of the Bible; but unless the Spirit of God sets the truth home, the character will not be transformed. Without the enlightenment of the Spirit, men will not be able to distinguish truth from error, and they will fall under the masterful temptations of Satan.

Not Hypocrites

The class represented by the foolish virgins are not hypocrites. They have a regard for the truth, they have advocated the truth, they are attracted to those who believe the truth; but they have not yielded themselves to the Holy Spirit's working. They have not fallen upon the Rock, Christ Jesus, and permitted their old nature to be broken up. . . .

The Spirit works upon man's heart, according to his desire and consent implanting in him a new nature; but the class represented by the foolish virgins have been content with a superficial work. They do not know God. They have not studied His character; they have not held communion with Him; therefore they do not know how to trust, how to look and live. . . .

It is in a crisis that character is revealed. When the earnest voice proclaimed at midnight, "Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him," and the sleeping virgins were roused from their slumbers, it was seen who had made preparation for the event. Both parties were taken unawares; but one was prepared for the emergency, and the other was found without preparation.

So now, a sudden and unlooked-for calamity, something that brings the soul face-to-face with death, will show whether there is any real faith in the promises of God. It will show whether the soul is sustained by grace. The great final test comes at the close of human probation, when it

BY ELLEN G. WHITE

will be too late for the soul's need to be supplied.

The ten virgins are watching in the evening of this earth's history. All claim to be Christians. All have a call, a name, a lamp, and all profess to be doing God's service. All apparently wait for Christ's appearing. But five are unready. Five will be found surprised, dismayed, outside the banquet hall. . . .

Lightbearers

In the parable the wise virgins had oil in their vessels with their lamps. Their light burned with undimmed flame through the night of watching. It helped to swell the illumination for the bridegroom's honor. . . .

So the followers of Christ are to shed

surrounded with a spiritual atmosphere of light and peace. He desires that we shall reveal His own joy in our lives.

The indwelling of the Spirit will be shown by the outflowing of heavenly love. The divine fullness will flow through the consecrated human agent, to be given forth to others.

The Sun of Righteousness has "healing in his wings" (Mal. 4:2). So from every true disciple is to be diffused an influence for life, courage, helpfulness, and true healing.

The religion of Christ means more than the forgiveness of sin; it means taking away our sins, and filling the vacuum with the graces of the Holy Spirit. It means divine illumination, rejoicing in God. It means a heart emptied of self,

and with the glory of the Father. He is coming with all the holy angels with Him. While all the world is plunged in darkness, there will be light in every dwelling of the saints. They will catch the first light of His second appearing. The unsullied light will shine from His splendor, and Christ the Redeemer will be admired by all who have served Him. While the wicked flee from His presence, Christ's followers will rejoice.

The patriarch Job, looking down to the time of Christ's second advent, said, "Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not a stranger" (Job 19:27, margin).

To His faithful followers Christ has been a daily companion and familiar friend. They have lived in close contact, in constant communion with God. Upon them the glory of the Lord has risen. In them the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ has been reflected. Now they rejoice in the undimmed rays of the brightness and glory of the King in His majesty. They are prepared for the communion of heaven; for they have heaven in their hearts.

With uplifted heads, with the bright beams of the Sun of Righteousness shining upon them, with rejoicing that their redemption draweth nigh, they go forth to meet the Bridegroom, saying, "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us" (Isa. 25:9).

"And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia; for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. . . . And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb." "He is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful" (Rev. 19:6-9; 17:14).

Questions for Discussion

1. What two classes are represented by the waiting virgins? How are they similar? How are they different?
2. What is represented by the oil?
3. In your judgment, to what period of history does this parable most specifically apply? Why?

Thus they are to glorify God, to lighten the path to the

Bridegroom's home . . . to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

light into the darkness of the world. Through the Holy Spirit, God's Word is a light as it becomes a transforming power in the life of the receiver. By implanting in their hearts the principles of His Word, the Holy Spirit develops in men the attributes of God. The light of His glory—His character—is to shine forth in His followers. Thus they are to glorify God, to lighten the path to the Bridegroom's home, to the City of God, to the marriage supper of the Lamb. . . .

It is the privilege of every soul to be a living channel through which God can communicate to the world the treasures of His grace, the unsearchable riches of Christ. There is nothing that Christ desires so much as agents who will represent to the world His Spirit and character. There is nothing that the world needs so much as the manifestation through humanity of the Saviour's love. All heaven is waiting for channels through which can be poured the holy oil to be a joy and blessing to human hearts.

Christ has made every provision that His church shall be a transformed body, illumined with the Light of the world, possessing the glory of Emmanuel. It is His purpose that every Christian shall be

and blessed with the abiding presence of Christ. When Christ reigns in the soul, there is purity, freedom from sin. The glory, the fullness, the completeness of the gospel plan is fulfilled in the life. The acceptance of the Saviour brings a glow of perfect peace, perfect love, perfect assurance. The beauty and fragrance of the character of Christ revealed in the life testifies that God has indeed sent His Son into the world to be its Saviour.

Christ does not bid His followers strive to shine. He says, *Let your light shine*. If you have received the grace of God, the light is in you. Remove the obstructions, and the Lord's glory will be revealed. The light will shine forth to penetrate and dispel the darkness. You cannot help shining within the range of your influence.

The revelation of His own glory in the form of humanity will bring heaven so near to men that the beauty adorning the inner temple will be seen in every soul in whom the Saviour dwells. Men will be captivated by the glory of an abiding Christ. And in currents of praise and thanksgiving from the many souls thus won to God, glory will flow back to the great Giver. . . .

Christ is coming with power and great glory. He is coming with His own glory

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Finding the Hidden Treasure

By Penny Estes Wheeler

Note from the author: My purpose in addressing these eight parables is twofold. First, I hope that the use of factual, descriptive detail adds a dimension of reality often missing from biblical stories. Second and most important, I hope that the parables and their applications will find a lasting place in the hearts of the children who hear them.

Because of the details of biblical geography, culture, etc., included in these stories, I encourage teachers to read the stories word for word. In general, the stories are written with short sentences and simple vocabulary. Naturally, when necessary, teachers must paraphrase for a very young audience.

The activity for the first story (sprouting alfalfa seeds) will continue throughout the week. The next three stories follow a sequence in their symbolism of God searching for the lost. Then we discuss preparing our hearts for Jesus and giving up everything to obtain the hidden treasure (the kingdom of heaven). The last reading leads the children to think about heaven.

S a b b a t h

The Farmer and the Seed

Story reference: Matthew 13:1-8; Mark 4:3-8

Farmer John looked out the window of his snug stone house. A soft rain splattered the hard, dry fields around his house. Mary, his young daughter, cuddled by his side, and he stroked her dark hair. "Hold me up, Father," she said, "so I can see the rain."

Mother hummed a little song as she lifted a pot from the fire. "It will still be raining after dinner," she told them. "Come now and eat."

They had a happy meal. It was a time to be joyful, for the autumn rains had begun. The rains would soften the sun-dried land, and after a few days cool winds would blow the clouds away. After a day or two of sunshine the muddy ground would dry and be just right for plowing.

After dinner Farmer John went to the shed to check on his plow. The plow was just a forked wooden stick with an iron tip on its point. Farmers used oxen or donkeys to pull it. It was hard work to guide the plow, even after the ground had been softened. It took strong arms and a good, straight eye. But even though the work was tiring, the farmer was eager to begin. After making certain that the plow was in good shape, Farmer John checked his bags of seed. Now there was nothing to do but wait.

Mary scampered along beside him when he plowed the first long, straight row. She chattered and sang, and her father was glad for her company. With his right hand, the

farmer held the plow. His left hand held a long stick that he used for guiding his donkeys. Donkeys could be stubborn, and he didn't have time to waste. The second rains would soon come, and the seed must be in before then.

At last it was time to sow the seed. Farmer John carried a load of seed tucked into a fold of his robe. He walked slowly, and with each step he tossed a handful of seed in a wide half circle. He tried hard to match his steps with the toss of the seed so that no seeds were wasted. He would

lose enough to the birds that followed him, chattering and swooping even though little Mary



flapped her arms and hollered at them to leave the seed alone.

Farmer John had been sowing seed in the fall for as long as he could remember. But this year was different. This year as he tossed the wheat in wide half circles, he had something new and wonderful to think about. For Farmer John had listened to a Teacher, a Man who told wise and wonderful tales. The stories told by the Teacher held meanings within meanings. And walking under the clear blue sky, sowing the wheat like his family had done for thousands of years, Farmer John remembered the Teacher's story.

The Teacher had talked about a farmer who had gone out to sow his seeds. As he scattered his seeds, some fell on the pathway, and birds swooped down to eat them. Some of the seeds fell on rocky places that didn't have much soil. They sprouted, but when the sun shone on them, they withered away because they had not been able to put down good roots.

Some of the seeds fell among briars and thistles. They sprouted, but the weeds soon choked the little plants, and they died. Still other seeds fell on good soil. The rains came, the sun shone, and the seeds grew up. At harvesttime the farmer discovered that the seeds in the good ground had produced a good crop. They produced 30 or 60 or even 100 times more than had been planted.

A strangely wonderful story, Farmer John thought. He pondered it as he plowed crosswise to the rows, covering the good seeds with soil. He'd heard the Teacher say that the seed stood for the Word of God. How was it that God's Word could die in a person's life or that it could grow and give a harvest 100 times greater than what had been planted?

The Teacher had told wise and wonderful stories. As Farmer John finished plowing, he looked at the seeds that had fallen at the edge of the field. The soil was thin there, covering rocky ground. He knew that the seeds would grow—then die. Something stirred in his mind. He wanted to be like the good soil. He wanted God's Word to do wonderful things for his heart.

Activity: Slowly read aloud Mark 4:13-20 or Matthew 13:18-23 from a modern version. Discuss the types of persons illustrated by the different types of

soil. Ask the children to give examples of situations that illustrate the different types of seeds. Examples: a person who refuses to hear the Word illustrates the seed snatched up by birds; a person destroyed by life's problems is illustrated by the seed among thorns. Be specific. Before class, prepare stories to tell that illustrate these four situations.

Bring a jar of alfalfa sprouts to class so the children may see sprouted seeds. Give each child a baby food jar with a few alfalfa seeds (or other small seeds) to sprout. Stretch netting over the mouth of the jar. Sprouting will be hastened by soaking seeds beforehand. Tape the child's name to the jar and let each child rinse the seeds. Keep the seeds in a dark cabinet. The teacher should rinse seeds once daily, and the child should rinse them at night. Sprouts will be ready to eat by the end of the week.

Soaked lima beans may be sprouted between wet paper towels or cloth. Sprouted limas vividly show root and sprout.

Bring four boxes of soil samples to class to illustrate the story.



Story reference: Luke 15:8-10

Rachel slapped her hand to her neck with a sharp gasp. It took only a few seconds for her fingers to slip across the coins. Where there had been 10, she counted only nine of the silver coins that she wore. The click she'd heard and the flash of silver she'd seen glinting on the dusty floor meant that one of the coins was lost.

The coin was part of Rachel's dowry, a present her husband had given her when they had married. Each coin was a symbol of his love for her. Each coin

showed that he cared about her and would protect her. Once more Rachel fingered the thin cord that held the coins. One of the coins had dropped to the floor.

Rachel's house was small, only one room, but firmly built of roughly cut blocks of limestone. A small window let in a square of light. The furniture was simple—a low stool, a table, and a cabinet for holding dishes. A clay cookstove sat on the floor, and pots and dried herbs hung from the rafters. The room served as both kitchen and bedroom, but as soon as the evening supper was eaten, the family cleared a space for their sleeping mats and went to bed.

Rachel didn't usually light a lamp during the day because oil was precious. But now she said to her young son, "Bring Mama the jar of oil."

She reached for the tiny clay lamp she kept in a niche in the wall, keeping her eyes on the spot where she thought the coin had fallen. Even 3-year-old Titus knew that oil was not to be wasted in the daytime. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Rachel explained as she poured about a teaspoon of oil into the lamp and lit the cotton wick. "Now you go outside and play while I search," she told him. "You can draw pictures for Mama in the dust with a stick."

Slowly, carefully, Rachel swept the hard-packed dirt floor. She paused every few seconds to let the dust settle. She bent down to hold the flickering light near the floor so that it might catch the glint of the precious coin. But she couldn't find it.

Then, holding her long skirt up with her left hand, Rachel knelt on the floor to search again. The light from the lamp shone in a pale circle, but she couldn't see the coin. Rachel crouched down and went over the floor inch by dusty inch, but the coin could not be found. She reached into corners and under cooking pots, but her fingers only grew grimy, and the loose dust and straw brought tears to her eyes.

Little Titus stood in the doorway, but Rachel wouldn't let him come in. "Help Mama look from the door," she told him. "See? I'll hold the lamp very close to the floor." She was on her hands and knees now, no longer worrying that her skirt would need washing. Inch by inch she crawled across the floor, searching

for the little silver coin that meant so much to her.

The sun, moving across the hot, clear sky, cast a shadow against the window of Rachel's house. A ribbon of sunlight no longer helped her search. Tears spilled down her cheeks, and she wiped them with a dusty hand. Her husband would be home soon. *She had to find the coin!*

She paused, thinking. Maybe it had rolled into a corner. She would begin on the edge of the room and work her way to the center. Her knees were sore, so she tucked her skirt under them to cushion the bits of straw and stone that had already made them bleed. And then slowly, carefully, she began searching once more. She held the light against the floor, tilting it so that it might catch the glint of the silver coin.

Her fingers felt it and her eyes saw it before her heart knew. "Titus!" she called. "I found it!" And the little boy ran to leap into his mother's arms.

Quickly Rachel tied the coin into a corner of a handkerchief and thrust the handkerchief deep into her pocket. Then she ran outdoors, calling to her neighbors. "Miriam! Sarah! I found my marriage coin. I searched for hours, and I found it!"

Heads popped out of doorways, and eyes peeked through windows. Sarah left her sweeping and Miriam left her barley bread baking to hurry into the pathway where Rachel stood. "Be happy with me," Rachel told them. Her voice lilted with laughter. "I have found my lost coin."

Lesson: The parable portrays God as a housewife searching for a coin. The coin represents someone who is lost. Have the children give examples of the types of people who are lost but do not know it. (Possible answer: people who have never heard about Jesus.) Note that in this story God does not give up the search until He has found what is lost. Then He calls His neighbors (whom do the neighbors represent?) to rejoice with Him.

Activities: 1. Make a "Bible lamp" by pouring a small amount of olive oil in a cup or saucer. Drop a cotton wick in it and light the wick. Turn out all the lights. 2. Young children will enjoy coloring paper "coins," cutting them out, and stringing them to wear like a Bible bride. Sometimes the coins were worn around the forehead. 3. Act out the story, letting the children take turns.

M o n d a y

The Good Shepherd

Story reference: Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:3-7; Christ's Object Lessons, pp. 85-188

The shepherd had had a long and tiring day, but then that's to be expected in the life of a shepherd. Early in the morning, as sunlight skimmed the edge of the horizon, the shepherd had awakened. He'd shaken his head, rubbed his eyes, stretched, and stood up. He'd heard the soft bleating of the sheep, low mumbings and grumbings from some of the old grannies, raspy mutterings from the husky rams.

He'd smiled to himself and looked toward the pen, where 100 woolly sheep waited for him to come and let them out. He slept in a little shelter placed to the side and slightly above the pen. That way he could see all the sheep in an instant, should trouble come and they need his help.

The morning had been chilly, so he'd wrapped his outer coat around him. He'd made the special call that his sheep recognized as their own. Each shepherd had his own personal call, unlike that of any other shepherd. He'd unlatched the wooden door and called for the sheep to follow.

The shepherd had led the sheep; he hadn't pushed them. They had followed the sound of his voice. They had walked a long ways. For a while they had followed a path between waving fields of grain. The sheep had been obedient and followed the shepherd's commands not to touch the grain. At last they had come to a green meadow. The shepherd had stopped them while he took a quick walk across it. His practiced eye had noted a plant that would be harmful if eaten, and

he had yanked it up by the roots. At last he had called to the sheep, and they had bounded across the pasture. While they had grazed, the shepherd had taken out a bag containing his own breakfast of bread and cheese. After eating, he had taken a long drink from the container he wore at his belt.

Now it was evening. It had not been a hard day. No wild animals had menaced the sheep. Maybe it had just been too hot. It had taken some time to draw enough water from the deep well to fill the troughs and give the sheep all the water they needed. All in all, the shepherd was glad to be back at the fold. After the sheep were safe for the night, he planned to build a little fire, fix his dinner, play his double-reed flute, and go to sleep.

One by one the sheep went under the low, arched doorway into the pen. He called each by name, stopping now and then to pour oil over a scratch from a thorn or to rub a woolly head. One by one, he counted the sheep as they went in: "... 97, 98, 99 ..." He looked up with a start, his eyes searching the pen. Ninety-nine. One sheep was missing. Which one was it?

To a person who didn't know sheep, they all looked alike—the lambs, the ewes, the rams. And from a distance, the sheep looked remarkably like the rocks that cropped up in pastures and across hillsides. The sheep, like the rocks, were grayish-white in color, for their wool picked up the dust from the ground. The shepherd ducked under the doorway, closed the door, and walked among his flock. His eye caught Sara, a big ewe with a spot of black on her forehead. He saw Baby-Baby and Trumpet, Mary and Shy One. Each sheep had a name, often based on a special characteristic of the sheep. And suddenly he knew. It was Scamper. Scamper, an adventuresome little boy sheep, had not come back with the flock.

Giving a low call to comfort them, the shepherd closed the door and picked up his rod. He didn't want to leave them without someone to watch them. Thieves could break in and steal one or all of the sheep while he was gone. A stranger passing by might grab a lamb for a quick stolen meal.

But Scamper was precious. A noisy, feisty, high-jumping lamb—the shep-

herd could not stand the thought of him spending a night alone.

The sun dropped below the hills as the shepherd strode back down the path. He didn't expect to find Scamper close to home, but he began calling anyway. When it was too dark to see, he lit a torch from a coal he carried with him. Holding the torch over his head, he hurried through the grainfields, calling Scamper's name.

It was dangerous for the shepherd to be out alone. Often there were bandits ready to rob or kill. Wild animals often came out at night. His ears were tuned to any noise, his eyes roamed back and forth to catch any strange movement. He heard the whisper of bird wings, the scratch of a lizard scuttling across a rock. But he didn't hear Scamper.

A wind began to blow, whipping his coat, and he wrapped it tighter around him. Soon great, dark clouds covered the moon and blotted out the stars. The wind snatched at the fire of his torch, and he held it closer to his body so it wouldn't go out.

"Scamper!" he called. "Scamper!"

Then he heard it, a "baa-aa" so faint it was almost nothing at all. He paused, gave his special shepherd's call, and listened. The sound, whisked away by the wind, reached his ears and he called again. Moments later he knelt on the ground, stretching to reach the small, whimpering form of young Scamper, who had fallen off a small cliff. Jamming the torch between two rocks, the shepherd used both hands and his rod to coax the sheep back up the cliff. Briers tore Scamper's fleece, and he cried in pain. Finally the lamb lay panting on the ground at the shepherd's feet.

What did the shepherd do then? Did he whack the lamb with his rod? Did he poke and prod Scamper, yelling at him to get up and be on his way home? Did he fuss at him, telling him what a

bad sheep he had been, telling him of all the trouble he had caused?

Luke tells us that when the shepherd finds the sheep, "he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home" (Luke 15:5, 6, NIV).

Can't you just see the shepherd cuddling the sheep close to his warm shoulders? Can't you hear him talking softly to the sheep, comforting him, loving him during the long walk home?

And what does the shepherd do when he gets back to the sheepfold? Does he toss the sheep in the pen and go to sleep? No. Of course not. After such kind treatment, you know that he gave the sheep water and put oil on any scratches or wounds. Then "he calls his friends and neighbors together and

says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep' " (verse 6, NIV).

Activities: Young children will enjoy gluing fluffy cotton to a drawing of a lamb. Below the picture, have printed "I have a little secret./Do you know who I am?/Jesus is my shepherd./I'm Jesus' little lamb."

This story illustrates people who are lost, and know they are lost, but are unable to help themselves. Discuss what circumstances might cause that. (Possible answers: kids bound by peer pressure, a person addicted to drugs.)

Divide the children into two groups.

Ask one group to act out the story of the lost sheep. Have the other group act out a story of a lost person.



T u e s d a y

The Son Who Left Home

Story reference: Luke 15:11-32;
Christ's Object Lessons, pp. 198-200

Philip was worried. He had thought about this for months, and there was no way he would change his mind. He didn't know if he could convince his father. But if Dad refused, he was going to leave anyway, Philip decided.

"Father," Philip said, "I've been thinking. My brother and I will inherit the farm someday, won't we?"

"Yes. Of course. You and Dan will divide the farm after I'm gone."

"Well, I want my part now."

Father looked up in surprise. "You might as well know it," Philip told him. "I'm leaving the farm. I hate working out in the hot sun and I hate all the rules."

In the end Father gave in, and Philip packed a few things, eager to leave. Mother took it hard, but Philip expected that. She sewed most of his money into the hems of his clothes so that he wouldn't lose it. She cried a lot, too.

He hadn't expected his dad to take it so hard. On that last morning Father insisted on going a ways with him. "You don't need to. I can go alone," Philip told him.

Father put his hand on his son's arm. "Don't tell your old father that he can't walk with you," he said. And so the two walked down the road together. At last Father stopped and motioned for Philip to look back. The farmhouse stood tall and strong between fields of grain. "This is your home," Father said. "Always remember, this is your home."

Philip whistled as he strode along, and he didn't look back. He wasn't sure where he was going—far past the first few towns, of course. He would travel as far as necessary until he came to a place

where people lived by their own rules.

Now and then Philip caught a ride on a farmer's wagon. Once he traveled a day with a caravan. When he reached the first large city, he was ready to stop.

Life was great. He never got tired of the action in the big city. There was always something new to see or do. No one told him how to choose his friends. No one told him how to spend his money.

Philip wasn't stupid. He didn't play all the time. He worked now and then, earning a little money. And so summer became winter, and winter gave way to spring, and summer returned, and Philip was still happy.

Then, almost without warning, came trouble. The Bible says that a bad famine came to the land. Philip's money ran low at the same time that it wasn't possible to find work. To his surprise, without money he lost his friends. He began to sell his clothes so he could buy food. He was thrown out of his apartment because he couldn't pay, so he walked up and down the streets, hunting for work and scrounging for food.

It was dangerous to live on the city streets, sleeping in alleys or parks. He could be beaten or killed just for the wrap he carried to keep warm. So he walked to the countryside, to the little farms, and begged the farmers for work. Finally one took pity on him and gave him the job of taking care of pigs. His stomach aching with hunger, Philip watched the pigs root around in the mud for the food the farmer tossed to them. He wanted to jump the fence and fight the pigs for the scraps.

Suddenly it hit him. *My father's servants eat a hundred times better than this!* he thought. *I will go back to my father and ask his forgiveness. I will beg him to let me come home as one of his hired servants.* With that thought, he turned away from the pigs and began the long journey home.

Philip had many miles to travel, but he wouldn't give up. And as he plodded mile after mile, he practiced his speech. "I have sinned. I am no longer worthy to be called your son . . ."

It was evening when he saw the farmhouse standing tall and strong against the distant hills. He stopped, waiting, thinking. He was scared now that he was so close to home. What if Father wouldn't take him back? He hadn't planned to come back. What if Father didn't want him?

He was tired and weak. His clothes were

filthy and torn. Maybe he would just creep to the edge of the farm and sleep in the stable. Maybe he could clean himself up in the morning and meet his father then.

Oh, no. It was too late to hide now. Someone was coming from far up the road. No, someone was running to meet him. It was his father. "Philip!" the old man called. "Philip!"

Philip smelled of pigs and sweat, but his father didn't care. He threw his arms around his son. He hugged and kissed him. "Father, I have sinned," Philip tried to tell him. "I'm no longer worthy to be called your son."

Bring Out the Best

Father wasn't listening. Tears streamed down his face. He took off his coat and wrapped it around his boy. "Let me come home and work as one of your servants," Philip said, but Father didn't hear him.

Father called to a servant. "Bring my best robe for him and tell someone to start cooking a feast." Before Philip could object, his father hustled him into the house.

They had a party that night. Father invited the neighbors, and the house soon filled with music, singing, and laughter.

Jesus told this story to show how God treats people who have sinned and who return to Him. We have heard three stories that show how God treats people who are lost. You remember that the housewife searched for the coin (that didn't know it was lost) and the shepherd searched for the sheep (that was lost but couldn't find his way home).

In the story of the prodigal son, the father (who represents God) did not go to the city and make his son come home. The son knew he was lost, and he knew how to get home. The father did not make him come home, and God will not make us love and obey Him. But the father—who stands for God—was waiting and watching for his son. And when he saw Philip, he ran to him. He hugged and kissed him, and he threw a party to show how happy he was to have him home.

Activity: Give each child a piece of paper and a pencil. Have him draw a picture of something that the son received when he got home. You may want to divide the children into small groups so that it is easier for each one to share, then ask the group leaders to share answers with the entire class.

A Very Foolish Man

Story reference: Matthew 7:24-27

A very foolish man once moved to the land of Palestine. He had plenty of money to spend, but he wasn't very smart. He knew what he wanted and he had the money to get it. He wanted a lovely big house, built away from the smaller homes of the poor people.

He chose a wonderful place to build his house. Much of Palestine is barren. It has little rainfall during much of the year, and where it doesn't rain, grass is scarce and trees are few. The land is beautiful though, rising and falling in interesting shapes. And when the sun comes up in the morning and goes down at night, long shadows cover the sandy ground. On a beautifully flat piece of ground the man decided to build his house.

He hired carpenters and stonemasons, and the work began. The house would be built from the best stone that could be brought into the area. The first-floor rooms would be built around a courtyard. The roof of the second story would be like a patio, where people could sit and visit or even sleep out under the stars. A little stable for the goats, sheep, and donkeys would be built on one side.

The foundation stones and the walls were already three feet high when a traveler happened by. The traveler's mouth opened in amazement. "What are you doing?" he asked the wealthy man.

"Can't you see? I'm building a house. Isn't this the best location in the world!" The foolish man motioned with his arm at the hills rising soft and rounded in the distance.

"But you must not build *here*," the stranger told him. "You are building your house on the sand. When the rains

come, it will wash away. You're building in a wide ravine. It is going to flood when the rains come."

The foolish man's eyes danced under his bushy eyebrows. His mouth, almost hidden by his full black beard, opened wide with laughter. "I'm not crazy!" he protested. "I would never build a house on the sand. This is good ground. And the floods don't come this far. There isn't a river for miles." He turned and glared at a workman who had stopped hammering to listen to the conversation.

The stranger stooped down and picked up a handful of earth. He rubbed it between his fingers, then squeezed the dirt in his fist.

Slowly, then faster and faster, the sandy soil trickled between his fingers to the ground.

"Well, I'd like to stay and talk," the foolish man said, taking the stranger's arm and hustling him on his way, "but I've got to get back to work. These builders stop if I don't watch them."

It was a beautiful house.

Standing on the rooftop, the foolish man could

see for miles. He smiled with pride. He'd put a vineyard on the south hillside and add a room in a year or two. The woman he was about to marry would be thrilled with this big house.

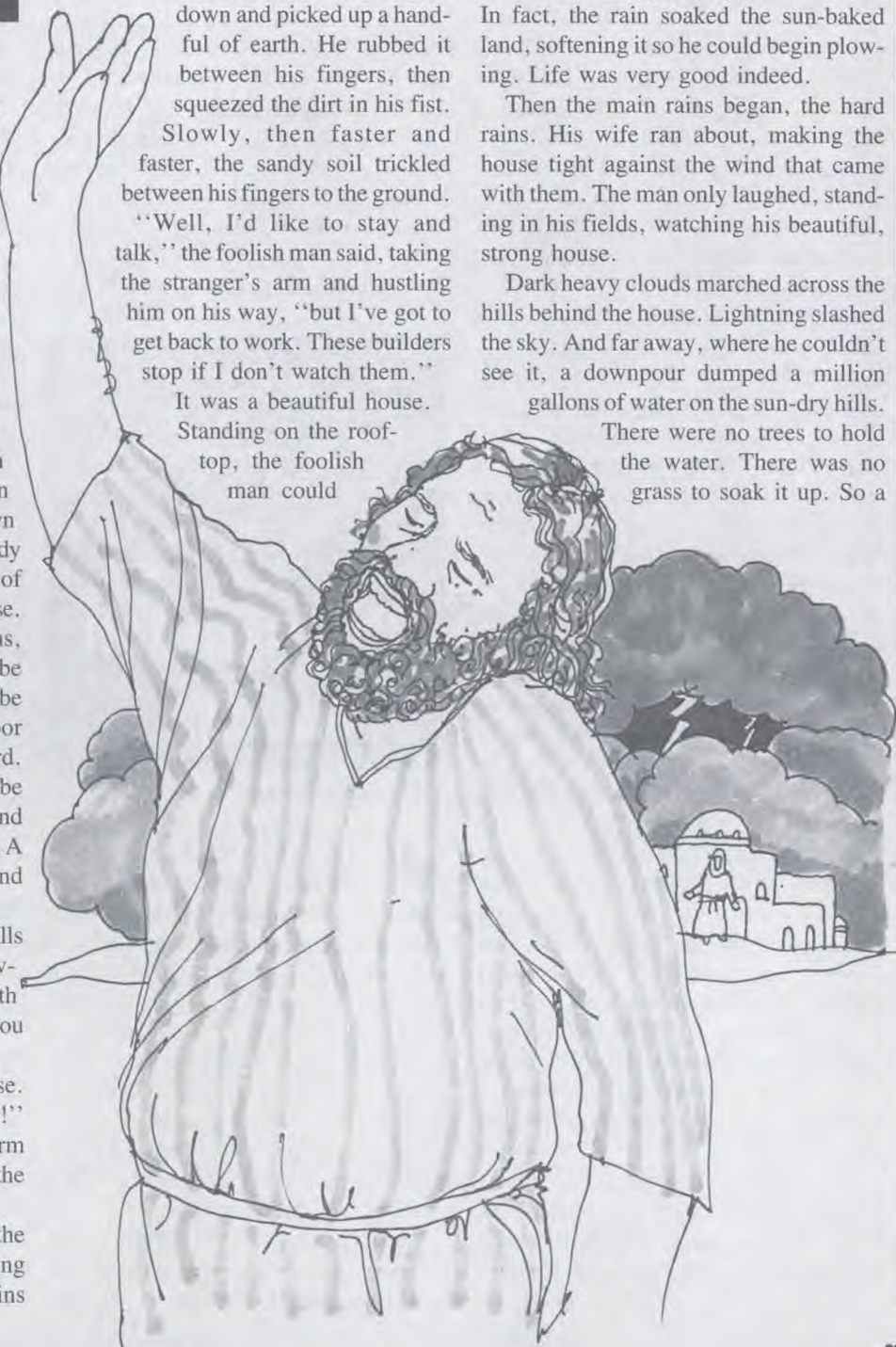
Everything went well for a while. His bride loved her new home. She had a deep well that gave cold, sweet water, and she used it to water her garden of cucumbers, onions, and melons.

The first rains came in September. They were gentle. The man laughed to himself, remembering the stranger. There was nothing wrong with his house. In fact, the rain soaked the sun-baked land, softening it so he could begin plowing. Life was very good indeed.

Then the main rains began, the hard rains. His wife ran about, making the house tight against the wind that came with them. The man only laughed, standing in his fields, watching his beautiful, strong house.

Dark heavy clouds marched across the hills behind the house. Lightning slashed the sky. And far away, where he couldn't see it, a downpour dumped a million gallons of water on the sun-dry hills.

There were no trees to hold the water. There was no grass to soak it up. So a



thousand little streams ran over the dry ground, racing down the walls of the ravine a few miles above where the beautiful house stood.

With every mile the stream grew wider, deeper, faster. Now it churned and boiled. Little sticks and big rocks tossed up and down on the muddy foam. But the foolish man didn't know it. Not yet . . .

The man's wife began to worry about her garden. "Maybe I should cover my plants," she told her husband. "This rain is going to beat them into the ground."

He looked at her and laughed. He dropped the towel he'd used to dry his arms and face, saying, "Go ahead. I think I'll stay in here where it's dry."

She opened the door and ran outside. A moment later she returned. "Husband!" she yelled. "Help!" She ran outside again, hurrying to the stable to set the livestock free.

Grumbling, he went to the door. He didn't want to go out in the rain. "Run for your life!" his wife screamed, pulling him with all her might. Gasping and panting, they scrambled up a steep, mud-slick hillside. In that moment, a wall of water rushed down the wide ravine. It hit the house with a sound like thunder. Waves foamed around the windows. Undercurrents sucked at the sandy soil under the house. The flood raced past, the foaming, muddy water stretching behind and before the house as far as the couple could see. And then, with a tremendous crash, the big, beautiful house came tumbling down.

When Jesus told this story, He said that everyone who listened to Him and put His words into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, yet it did not fall. But Jesus added that people who hear His words and do not practice them are like the foolish man who built his house on the sand. When the rains came, when the stream rose, and high winds blew, the house fell with a great crash.

Activity: The concept of accepting "truth" and "building on the rock" will be abstract for young children. It may be an entertaining story and a fun song to sing, but has little meaning. Bring the

meaning to their level by telling another story or two from your experience: a child who is tempted to lie but does not, a child who is tempted to disobey but does not. That child is building his life on solid rock!

In the 1989 San Francisco earthquake, the big, beautiful houses built on land that had been reclaimed from the ocean were the ones that were destroyed. The sandy soil became like liquid, like jello, when the earth shifted.

Be sure to end this dramatic story session on a positive note. God will help us build our "houses," our lives, on the rock of His Word. We can do so by learning memory verses, by being kind, by doing good deeds for others. Divide the children into groups of three or four, having an adult or older child with each group. Let each group write a true story about something good a child has done. These stories may be compiled into a little book and duplicated for each child.

T h u r s d a y

The Hidden Treasure

Story reference: Matthew 13:44-46

Mr. Matthias hurried along the dry, weedy field. The last of the grain had been harvested a year before. For some reason no one had used the field last year, and he had been lucky enough to rent it for his own use. In Palestine during Jesus' time, it was the lucky farmer who owned his own land. Most people sowed their wheat and barley on fields rented from wealthy landowners. Naturally, people who lived in houses clustered in a city did not have open fields in their backyards.

And so it was that Mr. Matthias strode over the rented field. He had farmed all his life and could tell at a glance whether

a field was too rough or rocky to grow good grain. He noticed a couple gullies running like dry rivers across the property. The extra-heavy rains of last autumn must have washed the dirt away. "I'll have to fill them in," he said to himself. He sighed, thinking of the work involved in digging up the rock-hard soil from one section of the field and carrying it to fill in the ditches.

He bent down at the first ditch, scratching at the dirt with a stick. The ground was hard. It needed rain. His robe stuck to his sweaty body. Then, as he straightened up, he saw something that made him drop to his knees and scratch in the ground with his bare hands.

His breath came fast. His heart beat faster. It couldn't be. It wasn't likely. He'd heard of such things, but no—it was impossible. His fingers bled from the rocky soil, and he grabbed the stick and stabbed the ground under the large clay pot. Sweat poured from his face, soaking his beard. He felt light-headed from heat and excitement.

At last he lifted the heavy clay pot from the ground. It was chipped and cracked but, surprisingly, unbroken. How long had it been buried? Was anything in it? He shook it gently and heard a faint clatter of something rattling inside. "It's not possible," he whispered. "Not possible."

His hands were shaking as he tried to pry the lead stopper from the mouth of the clay jar. He must be careful. He must not break it. At last the jar opened. Tipping it, he poured out a handful of coins, then a lapful of coins. Money! More money than he would ever see in a lifetime. In a dozen lifetimes. Someone had hidden the clay pot of money in the field. Maybe it had been during a time of war. Or maybe a wealthy man had hidden it from his enemies. The coins were old and tarnished, but they were real.

Mr. Matthias looked around, suddenly frightened. Had anybody seen him? No. No one was about. His heart thumped so hard he thought it might jump out of his chest as he pushed the jar back into the hole and covered it with dirt. Then he got up and hurried home.

His mind raced as he strode across the field, into town, down his narrow street to his house. He had to have a plan. If he owned the field, the hidden pot and all

the money would be his. But how could he buy the land?

He hardly touched his supper that night, and his wife fluttered and fussed, thinking he was sick. Even his children noticed something was wrong. He couldn't sleep, either. One thing filled his mind. He had to buy the land. He had to raise enough money to buy the field. There had to be a way.

The first thing the next morning he went to the owner of the field and asked the selling price. It was reasonable, but more money than he could possibly get his hands on. He walked the streets all morning, then hurried to the field—*his field*. He didn't dare try digging up the pot again, but from the best he could tell, it hadn't been disturbed.

That afternoon he made a decision. First, he couldn't tell anybody what he had found. He couldn't trust anybody, because if someone knew, the secret could slip out. Second, he would sell everything he could get his hands on to get the money to buy the land.

Then he went to the marketplace to spread the word that his house was for sale. What else could he sell? His tools. Of course. They were well made and would bring a good price. He had to get the most possible for everything or he'd never have enough to buy the land. His mind flew faster than his feet, planning, planning, planning.

His wife thought he had gone crazy, and his children were confused. But one by one, Mr. Matthias sold his tools, his workbench, his plow, and the donkeys that pulled the plow. He sold his wife's chickens. He sold his sleeping mat and the baskets his wife stored food in. Anything and everything he could get his hands on, he sold. Last of all, he sold the house. He and his family were on the streets. All they owned was what they could carry in their arms. His daughter had a few trinkets. His son, a wooden

ball. His wife never stopped crying.

It had been a nightmare, but at last Mr. Matthias had enough money. He went to the landowner and paid cash. The man gave him a bill of sale and a little map that showed the boundaries of the field. The man was indifferent and a little bored. He couldn't imagine why poor Mr. Matthias wanted the rock field, and he didn't care. The few dollars he got from renting it now and then hardly paid the taxes on it.

Mr. Matthias' family waited in the street. They were confused and exhausted. Father still didn't say much; he just began walking and told them to follow. He walked fast, whistling a happy tune, and his wife began crying again.

Out of the town they went, down the dirt road, into the field. Their field. It was hard and dry. Weeds grew in clumps over it, and the stubble of the last crop scratched their ankles. "Come on! Come on!" Mr. Matthias commanded, but they didn't hurry. They couldn't hurry. It seemed that Father had lost his mind.

Suddenly Mr. Matthias dropped to his knees and began digging. The little family stood around him, watching and

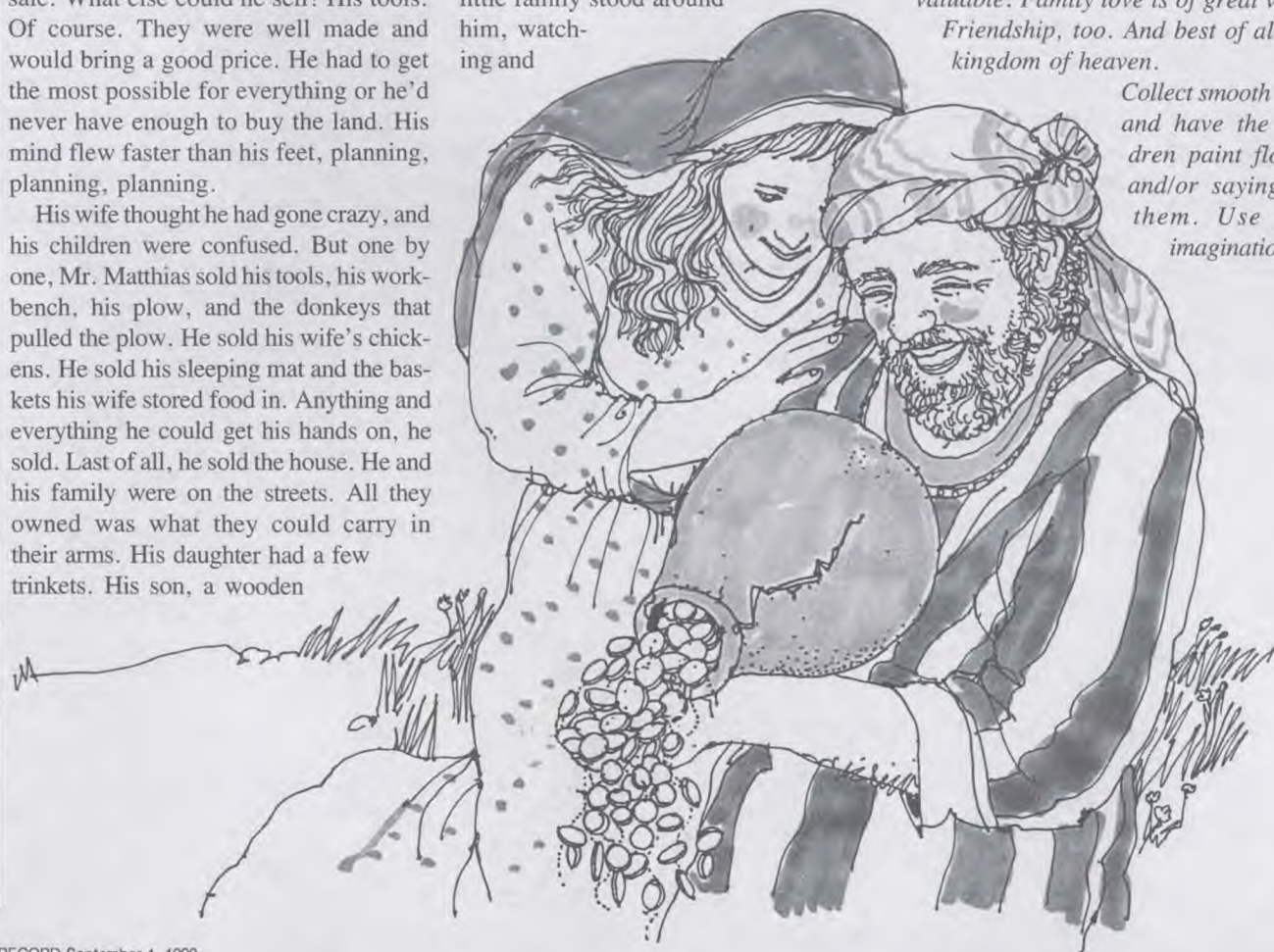
wondering. They still didn't understand. A moment later Father lifted a large clay pot out of the ground. He looked up, a huge grin on his face. He shook it and they heard the rattle of coins.

Then the whole story tumbled out. How he had found the pot full of money. How he didn't dare tell anyone, and how it had taken everything he had to get enough money to buy it. Now they were all crying, laughing and crying at the same time. "We're rich!" Father told them. "We can buy a new house. We can buy anything we need. We own this field. We have more money than I thought I would see in the whole world."

Mother grabbed Father's hand, and they danced around the rocky field. The children danced too.

Activity: Read today's text aloud. Explain how Jesus was teaching that we must know what is most valuable (the kingdom of heaven; eternal life), then let nothing stand in the way of obtaining it. Make a list of things that are important. The list may include such intangibles as a smile and a hug. Older children understand that an education is valuable. Family love is of great value. Friendship, too. And best of all, the kingdom of heaven.

Collect smooth rocks and have the children paint flowers and/or sayings on them. Use your imagination.



F r i d a y

The Good Samaritan

Story reference: Luke 10:30-37

Do be careful," Mrs. Jonas said to her husband. "I won't rest easy until you're home again."

Jonas pulled the sash of his robe tighter and his hand brushed against the little money bag he wore under his robe.

"You worry too much," he told her. "I'll be careful. Maybe there will be another traveler to walk with."

Mrs. Jonas sighed and tucked a little parcel into his hand. "I made you some lunch," she told him. "Now don't fuss. Twenty miles is a long way to walk, and you'll be glad for it when the sun is high."

He had to laugh. "This will slow me down, it will. What do you have in there?"

"Only a few fishes and flat bread. And of course there's juice and some dried figs." "Do be careful. And hurry home."

They walked to the door. The sun hadn't yet climbed over the hills of the Judean desert, but already

Jerusalem was stirring. Roosters crowed. Cows mooed. Peddlers were up and about, heavy sacks over their shoulders. "I'll be home in three days," he told her. "Four days at the most. Look for me in the evening." He reached out and touched her long black hair. Then he was gone.

The road down from Jerusalem to Jericho was rough and narrow. It followed a dry riverbed, a canyon, cut long ago by heavy floods. Every step Mr. Jonas took carried him lower into the valley. He walked briskly, humming to himself. The trip would not be easy, but he had business to attend to. He wished his wife didn't worry. The tangy scent of dried fish tickled his nose, and he laughed aloud.

Rocks were strewn across the roadway, and now and then he had to walk around a pile of rubble. The sun peeked over the horizon, and suddenly the bare Judean hills glowed with a golden light. Mr. Jonas walked faster. He'd hoped to find someone to walk with. It was a dangerous road, known for bandits and robbers. But he wasn't worried. He was strong and smart.

The sun climbed higher. Its white light bleached the desert hills. He squinted against the light and pulled his head shawl down to shade his eyes. The hills were full of little caves. They looked

like black, blind eyes and they made him nervous. A man could hide in a cave and

leap out to rob a person. Wild animals sometimes hid in them, but he had no fear of wild animals. Not in the daytime. He saw lizards sunning by the roadside. Now and then one skittered across the road, and he stumbled to avoid stepping on it.

Suddenly, without warning, robbers surrounded him. One leaped on his back. Another hit him in the stomach. They tore off his clothes, took his lunch and his bag of money, kicked him and hit him again and again and, at last, left him to die under the hot desert sun.

He had no idea how long he lay there. No one heard his moans. No one saw the flies that buzzed over his bleeding wounds. Then, at last, he heard footsteps. He tried to cry out, but his throat was too dry. The footsteps came nearer, but they never slowed down. It was a priest, a man who served God in the Temple. But the priest wouldn't look at him. He just hurried on by.

Mr. Jonas fell unconscious. He didn't know when footsteps came again. He didn't see the Levite, a wealthy man, pull up his robes and hurry past.

Mr. Jonas came to as someone poured water into his mouth and over his face. Kind hands were cleaning his wounds. He felt oil soothing the cuts on his bruised skin. He heard a soft voice murmuring encouraging words. He tried to open his eyes and speak, but he didn't seem able to do so. He felt himself being lifted, being placed on the back of a donkey. Then strong arms held him up, and the kind voice commanded the donkey to move on.

His body ached with every jolt of the donkey's hooves, and he felt himself coming back to consciousness. "Who are you?" he said at last.

The man chuckled. "Waking up, are you? And about time, I guess." The man gave his name and added, "I'm from Samaria. Lucky for you I'm on my way to Jericho. You're going to have to rest up a bit before you're able to travel again."

Now and then the Samaritan let the donkey stop. He made sure that Mr. Jonas was as comfortable as possible. He poured more oil into his wounds and covered his back with his own cloak.

It was dark when they arrived in Jericho. The Samaritan took Mr. Jonas to an inn and helped the owner put



him to bed. He stayed with him during the night, giving him water when he awakened from a restless sleep. In the morning the Samaritan gave the innkeeper two silver coins. "Look after this man," he said. "When I return, I'll pay you for any extra expense you might have."

After Jesus told this story, He asked "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" (Luke 10:36, NIV).

Activities: 1. Discuss the meaning of "neighbor" in the way Jesus used it. 2. Explain why it was so unusual for a Samaritan to help a Jew. 3. Give each child a pipe cleaner. Have each child shape the pipe cleaner into something that illustrates how one can be a true neighbor. 4. Present problems illustrating need. Have the children tell how one could be a good neighbor in those situations. Bring them close to "home."

S a b b a t h

The 10 Bridesmaids

Story reference: Matthew 25:1-13

Everybody loves a wedding. At least most girls do. When Jesus lived on earth, weddings were big affairs, much bigger than they are today. The wedding celebrations of rich people could last for days. You remember that Jesus performed His first miracle at a wedding. The wedding party had lasted so long that they had run out of grape juice.

Jesus told a story of another wedding, or rather of 10 young ladies who were bridesmaids at a wedding. Jesus said that what happened to them illustrates what it will be like for people when He comes.

Ten bridesmaids, dressed in their most beautiful clothes, went out to meet the bridegroom. What a strange thing to do. When a couple marries today, the brides-

maids don't go into town at night to wait for the bridegroom to come. But that's what they did in Jesus' time. It was part of the celebration—the young ladies waiting for the bridegroom to come. And the bridegroom was always late.

Because it was night, each of the 10 girls carried a little lamp. Five of the girls were wise. They knew that the bridegroom could be late and that their lamps might run out of oil. So they carried little jars of oil with them.

But the other five girls didn't see any reason to carry extra oil. Maybe they were careless. Maybe they were lazy. It's all the sadder because it was so easy to carry extra oil.

Archaeologists (people who dig for things buried in the ground long ago) have found the kind of oil jars that the wise girls carried. They are small, only three or four inches long. They hold just enough oil to fill a little lamp. People carried the little jar hanging from the wrist on a string of rawhide. It's interesting that the stoppers of these jars were often carved into fancy shapes such as heads of animals.

Anyway, it grew later and later, and still the bridegroom had not come. The girls grew tired of standing and watching, so they sat down. Then they grew drowsy. One after another, they began to yawn. And then—they fell asleep.

At midnight a cry rang out in the darkness. "The bridegroom is coming!"

All 10 girls scrambled up. They rubbed their eyes and smoothed their hair, but no—something was wrong. Their lamps were sputtering. They fussed with the wicks, tipping the lamps so the wicks could catch the last drops of oil. But it was too late. The lamps were almost empty.

Quickly the five girls who had brought extra oil poured it into their lamps. Within seconds, their lamps shone again.

The five foolish girls begged, "Give us some of your oil for our lamps. They're going out too."

"No" was the reply. "There may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves" (Matt. 25:9, NIV).

There was nothing else to do but hurry into town to find someone who could sell them oil. But while they were gone, the bridegroom and his party came rushing down the road. They were laughing and singing, and the five wise bridesmaids

quickly joined the happy group. They all went in to the wedding banquet, and the door was shut.

Some time later the five foolish girls came back. "Let us in," they cried at the closed door. "Open the door for us."

But the doorkeeper answered, "I tell you the truth, I don't know you" (verse 12, NIV).

"Therefore," Jesus said, "keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour [when Jesus will come]" (verse 13, NIV).

Don't you think those are some of the saddest words in the whole Bible—"I don't know you"? But the good news is that Jesus told this story to help His followers be ready for His coming.

Jesus is coming. We don't know the day or the hour, but we know it will be soon. He will take those who are ready to meet Him to heaven. And that's the best news in the whole world!

Activities: How can you be ready for Jesus? Stress that obedience and the good and kind things we do show that we have accepted Jesus' sacrifice and are living for Him.

Prepare a little scroll or other device with John 3:16 on it for the children to take home. Older children will enjoy making their own.

Divide the children into groups and act out the story of the 10 bridesmaids.

Divide the children into groups. Assign one of the parables studied this week to each group and have the group silently act it out. After the act, have others tell which parable it was.

Discuss heaven. Try to get beyond the "to ride a lion" stage to other aspects of heaven. Talk about forgiveness. Talk about living without fear. Everyone in today's world is afraid. Discuss being able to talk to strangers without fear; about going on a trip and knowing that your car won't break down and that no one will get a cold or the flu while you're gone. Bring the discussion to the level of the kids, but help them to stretch their minds to think of the blessings of heaven in new ways.



Penny Estes Wheeler is acquisitions editor at the Review and Herald Publishing Association.



BY NEAL C. WILSON
General Conference president

A Message From the President

Dear Fellow Believers:

In its infancy, our church tried to face, realistically, the challenge of Jesus' command to "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28:19). Shortly before, Jesus had given the promise that "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" (Matt. 24:14).

As our pioneers saw the situation, they believed Jesus was coming very soon, possibly within a decade. They were short in time and resources, and the thought scarcely entered their minds that their duty was to evangelize the entire earth.

Then the opportunity came to carry the third angel's message to Europe, then to Africa and the Far East. With the positive encouragement and earnest appeal of Ellen White, the church broadened its vision to include the whole world. But again, perhaps we were too satisfied just to be able to say we were "represented" in many of the countries and political divisions of the world. Some nations have dozens, perhaps scores, of distinct language groups within their borders. To have work in one language or ethnic area does not answer to the challenge of the other areas.

I am happy to state that the church has enlarged its vision once again. In the Global Strategy program recently adopted, the church has announced that it is no longer satisfied with simply being represented in most of the more than 200 political entities of the world. Rather, it is now our goal to penetrate every one of the 5,000 or so ethnic-linguistic and demographic groupings of the world—and that within the next 10 years! Doesn't this challenge stir your soul to action? It certainly gives us a very specific prayer objective.

"The message of truth that we bear must go to nations, tongues, and peoples. Soon it will go with a loud voice, and the earth will be lightened with its glory. Are we preparing for this great outpouring of the Spirit of God?" (*Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 383).

The beauty of the Global Strategy program is that it is not limited to formal church "institutional" representation. In fact, it would be doomed from the start if that were the case. We must gather inspiration from the examples of the early church—such as the believers who left Jerusalem for the uttermost parts, and self-supporting lay missionaries such as Aquila and Priscilla—as well as countless other examples through the centuries. Consider the possibility that now exists for hundreds, yes, thousands, of dedicated Adventist families, technicians, and professionals to go into places the church cannot enter. They can make an impact in a personal way that cannot be achieved by institutions.

Friends, the world is changing fast. The church of God must move with these changes. We must enter the doors that have opened.

Sincerely your brother,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Neal C. Wilson".

Neal C. Wilson