

THE  
WORDS  
THAT  
UNDO  
THE  
CURSE

TEACHINGS  
OF  
JESUS

REVERSING GENESIS 3

WHAT WAS LOST IN EDEN  
IS RESTORED IN CHRIST.

*“Behold, I make all things new.”*

— REVELATION 21:5 —



THE CURSE  
BEGAN



THE CROSS  
WAS BORNE



THE KINGDOM  
HAS COME

◆ A JOURNEY FROM DEFEAT TO VICTORY ◆

# **The WORDS That Undo the Curse**

*The Teachings of Jesus, Reversing Genesis 3*

Bobby Joseph

*The Words That Undo the Curse: The Teachings of Jesus,  
Reversing Genesis 3*

Copyright © 2026 Bobby Joseph

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Scripture quotations are the author's adaptation, drawing from major English translations including the English Standard Version (ESV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the King James Version (KJV).

Published 2026

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: [ASSIGN UPON KDP PUBLICATION]

## **Preface**

This book is a comprehensive study of the teachings of Jesus, read as the slow, deliberate reversal of what Genesis 3 set in motion.

Open the Gospels with Genesis 3 still open beside them, and a shape begins to surface that most readers do not see when they read either book alone. The Sermon on the Mount sits where it sits because Genesis 3 came before it. The parables are told to people whose lostness began east of Eden. The Upper Room exists because there is an exile to be ended. The Cross stands where it stands because there is a curse to be borne, and there is no other place in human history where the curse can be borne in such a way that it gets undone.

Every consequence laid down in that chapter, the heart turned inward, the brother turned against brother, the ground turned thorny, the body turned mortal, the gate turned shut, finds its answer somewhere in the four Gospels. Sometimes the answer is direct. Sometimes it is buried inside a parable. Sometimes it is enacted before it is explained. But the pattern is real, and once you see it, the Gospels open in a new way.

The book is built in three parts. Part One walks through the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus addresses character, ethics, prayer, possessions, and the foundation of life. Part Two walks through the parables, where Jesus reveals the kingdom in story. Part Three walks through the final teachings, where Jesus speaks his last and most concentrated words to those who will carry them forward. Three settings. One arc. The curse, being undone, one teaching at a time.

The companion to this book is *The Torah Blueprint*, a five-volume work that traces how the four Gospels are built on the Pentateuch. The two works complement each other. The

Torah Blueprint shows how the Gospels are constructed. The Words That Undo the Curse walks through what Jesus actually said. Both belong on the same shelf, but each can be read on its own.

## **Note to the Reader**

This is a long book covering a wide territory. It can be read straight through, following the arc from the Sermon to the parables to the final teachings, or one section at a time as you study the corresponding passages of Scripture. The italicized landings at the end of each chapter consolidate what the chapter has shown. They are meant to be paused on, not skimmed.

I write as a believer for believers. I have not been to seminary. For nearly twenty years I have studied under Mark Lanier in his Biblical Literacy class at Champion Forest Baptist Church, a class rich in languages, archaeology, and careful exposition that became my functional seminary. For more than twenty-five years I have preached monthly at Houston's Open Door Mission, where sitting with men who know homelessness, addiction, and estrangement has made exile and homecoming very concrete for me. When I write about the heart turned inward, the brother turned against brother, and the long road of return, I am writing about men I know by name. The theology in these pages is not abstract to me. It has faces.

Read your Bible alongside this book. The Sermon on the Mount is in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. The parables are scattered through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, with the references given as we go. The Upper Room Discourse is in John 13 through 17. The Olivet Discourse is in Matthew 24 and 25. The post-resurrection material is in Matthew 28, Luke 24, and John 20 and 21. Open these passages. Read what Jesus says. Then read what this book says about what Jesus says. The book is not a substitute for the text. It is an invitation to read the text more slowly than you have ever read it before.

And read with Genesis 3 in mind. The two chapters answer each other across thousands of years.

## **How to Read This Book**

Read it slowly. The Sermon was preached slowly. The parables were told to people who needed time to absorb them. The Upper Room teaching unfolded over the course of one long evening. The book that walks through them rewards being read at the same pace.

Each chapter takes one body of teaching and treats it pastorally. The chapters can be read in sequence or separately, but the cumulative reading is the deeper one. The three parts build on each other. Part One is the curriculum of the kingdom life. Part Two is the family the kingdom gathers. Part Three is the testament given to those who will carry the kingdom forward.

Greek words appear occasionally, transliterated and italicized, when they help the reader hear what the original would have heard. The book is not a lexicon. It is a pastoral walk through the most consequential teaching ever delivered.

## **Introduction: Where the Curse Began**

Genesis 3 is the sentence the world has been living under since it was pronounced. The Sermon on the Mount, the parables, the Upper Room, the Olivet Discourse, and the post-resurrection commissioning are the words that overturn it. Word by word. Teaching by teaching.

This book begins where the Sermon begins. With character. With the kind of person Jesus pronounces blessed before that person has done a single thing. With the heart that has been turned outward again, after Genesis 3 turned it inward.

From there the book moves to the parables. Stories told by Jesus on the road, at the dinner table, in the synagogue, on the temple steps. Each story reveals one facet of the kingdom the Sermon described. Some parables are about the kingdom's hidden growth. Some are about its surprising inversions. Some are about the persistent seeking it invites. Some are about the long delay before its full arrival. Some are about the final sorting that will end the delay.

And from the parables the book moves to the last teachings. The foot washing in the Upper Room. The promises about the Helper and the Vine and the Way. The High Priestly Prayer. The Olivet Discourse. The post-resurrection commissioning. The final words Jesus gave to the disciples before he left them, words that would have to carry them, and the church through every century, until he returned.

The book closes where the curse closes. With the curse undone. Not by triumphalism. By the slow, deliberate work of Jesus's teaching, his death, and his resurrection, which together accomplish what Genesis 3 made necessary and what the words of Jesus made possible.

Three parts. Seventeen chapters. The teachings of Jesus, walked through carefully, with Genesis 3 always in mind.

# Part One

## *Words from the Mountain*

Jesus went up on a mountain, sat down, and spoke. The crowds had been gathering. The disciples had drawn close. What he said that morning is the most consequential ethical teaching ever delivered, and it has been read more times than any sermon ever preached. It is what character looks like in the kingdom he had come to inaugurate. The seven chapters of Part One walk through it in the order Jesus delivered it, following its actual movement from interior character outward to foundational metaphor. Read with Genesis 3 in mind. The Sermon is, among other things, the curriculum of the Edenic life given to people while the curse is still operative around them.

# Who You Are

## What the Beatitudes Are Not

The Beatitudes are not a moral checklist. They are not eight virtues to cultivate so that the kingdom of heaven might one day belong to you. They are not entrance requirements. They are not the eight habits of highly effective disciples. Treating them as any of these is the most common mistake made about the most quoted teaching of Jesus, and it produces, every time, a kind of religion the Beatitudes themselves were spoken to undo.

The Beatitudes are something else. They are a portrait. A sequence of declarations spoken by Jesus, sitting on a mountainside, looking at people the world had no use for, saying: blessed are you. Present tense. Not when you become poor in spirit. Now, while you are. Not when you have learned to mourn well. Now, in the middle of the mourning. Not when your hunger for righteousness has been satisfied. Now, while you are still hungry.

The Beatitudes are not telling people what to become. They are telling people who they already are, in the eyes of the only one whose verdict ultimately matters.

This changes how the rest of the Sermon must be read. Everything that follows in Matthew 5, 6, and 7 is not a series of demands placed on people who have to earn their way into the kingdom. It is a description of what life looks like for people who have already entered it. The Beatitudes establish the audience. The rest of the Sermon describes their lives.

## The First Four

The poor in spirit are those who have nothing left to protect. They are not pretending. They are not curating an image. They are spiritually destitute, and they know it. The Greek word is *ptōchos*, and it does not mean the working poor. It means the beggar, the one who has held out an empty hand long enough to know the hand is empty. To people in this condition, Jesus says: yours is the kingdom of heaven. Present tense. The kingdom does not belong to those who have become poor in spirit through years of disciplined humility. It belongs to those who have given up on hiding.

The mourners are those who have wept, and have not pretended otherwise. They have not been able to walk into the kingdom dry-eyed. The Greek verb *pentheō* is the verb for mourning the dead. This is not light sadness. It is the grief that comes when something has been lost that cannot be replaced, and one's own moral failure is at the top of the list. To people in this condition, Jesus says: you shall be comforted. The verb is *parakaleō*, the same root from which John takes the name *Paraklētos*, the Helper Jesus will send. The mourners get the Helper. The dry-eyed have to find their own.

The meek are those whose strength has been brought into willing partnership rather than self-assertion. The Greek word *praüs* describes a horse broken to bridle: not weakness, but power that has surrendered its right to assert itself. The meek are not doormats. They are people of real capacity who have stopped insisting on getting their way. To people in this condition, Jesus says: you shall inherit the earth. The earth, in all its long history of being seized by the strong, will finally come to those who have stopped trying to seize it. The promise echoes Psalm 37, which Jesus is quoting almost word for

word. The strong have always assumed the future was theirs. Jesus says it is going to the meek.

The hungering and thirsting are those who have admitted their appetite. They are not full. They have not been quieted by religious performance or moral self-congratulation. They want the righteousness they do not have. The verb *peinaō* is the verb of real hunger, the kind that hurts. The verb *dipsaō* is the verb of real thirst, the kind that drives. The blessing is for those whose ache for righteousness has not been blunted by their own assessment of how righteous they already are. To people in this condition, Jesus says: you shall be satisfied. The verb is *chortazō*, the word used of feeding cattle to the point of fullness. The hungry get filled. The complacent stay hungry without knowing it.

## **The Next Four**

The merciful are not the people who keep score and forgive when the math comes out right. They are the people who have learned, by being recipients of mercy, that they have nothing to keep score with. The Greek word *eleēmōn* names the kind of mercy that goes out of its way: not cool tolerance, but warm action toward those who do not deserve it. To people in this condition, Jesus says: you shall receive mercy. The mercy you cannot calculate, you shall be enclosed by. It is not earned. It is the climate the merciful have already begun to live in.

The pure in heart are those whose interior life has stopped serving two masters. The Greek word *katharos* is the word for the cleansed temple. The pure in heart are not those who have never been impure. They are those whose hearts have been swept clean by grace and now serve a single purpose. They are not divided. They are not double-minded. They have come to one master, and the master has reordered everything inside

them. To people in this condition, Jesus says: you shall see God. The Hebrew Scriptures are unanimous that no one can see God and live. The pure in heart will see him and not die. The exception that grace makes is total.

The peacemakers do not merely tolerate. They actively heal. They restore what is broken between people. They are not conflict-avoiders. They are conflict-resolvers, willing to enter the difficulty and bring the broken parts of human relationship back into wholeness. The Greek word is *eirēnopoios*, peace-maker, an active compound. The Hebrew background is *shalom*, full restoration, not mere absence of conflict. To people in this condition, Jesus says: you shall be called sons of God. The family resemblance is unmistakable. They are doing what God is doing in the world, which is reconciling estranged parties and putting back together what has been broken apart.

The persecuted are those who have lived a kingdom life in the middle of a culture that does not know what to do with kingdom life, and the culture has reacted as cultures do. They have not picked a fight. They have not become difficult. They have become honest, and the world has noticed. To people in this condition, Jesus says: yours is the kingdom of heaven. The same blessing as the first Beatitude. The book of life is open at both ends to those who came in honest. Theirs at the start, when they were poor in spirit. Theirs at the end, when they are persecuted for the kingdom they have come to belong to.

## **The Eight as One**

The eight Beatitudes are not eight separate beatitudes. They are one Beatitude told eight ways. They describe one kind of person from eight angles. The person described is what

humanity looks like when grace has reached the place where pride went deepest, and the result is a heart that has stopped defending itself.

This is why the Beatitudes cannot be cultivated by self-improvement. The defended interior cannot decide to undefend itself. The dry eyes cannot decide to weep. The complacent stomach cannot decide to hunger. These are not virtues. They are signs that grace has done its work. The Beatitudes describe what the kingdom produces in people, not what people must produce to enter the kingdom.

If you read the Beatitudes and do not recognize yourself in any of them, the trouble is not that you are not yet good enough. The trouble is that you are still defended. The Beatitudes are spoken to the broken, the honest, the hungry, and the merciful. They are not spoken to the complacent. The kingdom comes when grace has met the interior we made and the interior has finally let it in.

And there is one more thing to notice before the chapter closes. The Beatitudes are spoken on a mountain, in the morning, to people who had walked out from their towns and their farms to hear this man whose words had been spreading through Galilee. The first thing they hear, sitting on the grass, is who they already are in his eyes. Before he asks them to do anything. Before he tells them how to live. Before the antitheses, the Lord's Prayer, the warnings, or the concluding image of two foundations. The first thing he gives them is the gift of being seen. Blessed are you.

The Sermon does not begin with command. It begins with grace.

*the Beatitudes — eight declarations of grace  
pronounced over people the world had no use*

*for, describing what humanity looks like when grace has reached the heart and begun to turn it outward. Not virtues to cultivate. Not entrance requirements. Portraits of the heart that has stopped defending itself. The kingdom is described in the present tense for the broken at the start and the persecuted at the end, because the kingdom belongs to the honest from the moment they stop hiding to the moment the world makes them pay for not hiding.*

# **What You Are For**

## **Salt and Light**

Immediately after the Beatitudes, Jesus turns and addresses his audience with a different verb. He has been telling them who they are. Now he tells them what they are for.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Two metaphors, side by side, in the present tense. Not you must become salt. Not you should aspire to be light. You are. The character he has just described in the Beatitudes is not a private possession. It has a public purpose, and the metaphors he chooses to name that purpose are surprisingly simple.

Salt and light are two things that do not draw attention to themselves. Nobody at the table praises the salt. The light in the room is noticed only when it goes out. Salt and light work by being what they are, not by performing their function in a way that attracts notice. The character of the Beatitudes is meant to function the same way. The poor in spirit do not announce themselves. The peacemakers do not collect credit. The pure in heart do not cultivate a reputation for purity. They simply are, and the room is different because they are in it.

## **The Salt of the Earth**

Salt in the ancient world had three primary uses, and each one says something Jesus is about to say.

Salt preserved. Without refrigeration, salt was the difference between food that could be carried on a journey and food that would rot in three days. The disciples are sent into a world that is, on its own, perishing. Their presence preserves what is good and slows the rot. They do not save the world by themselves. They are not asked to. They are asked to be what

salt is: a preservative slowing the process while the larger work proceeds.

Salt seasoned. Food without salt is flat. The presence of salt does not change what the food is. It changes how the food tastes, by drawing out what was already there. The disciples are not asked to invent the flavor of the world. They are asked to bring out the flavor that was there, hidden beneath blandness and habit and the dulling effect of long resignation. People around them should taste what they had stopped tasting. The kingdom is salty. It wakes up the palate.

Salt purified. In the temple sacrifices, salt was added to every offering. Every grain offering. Every animal offering. The covenant of salt was the symbol of an unbroken bond between God and his people. The disciples are the salt of the earth in this sense too: they are the visible covenant, the people in whom the unbroken bond between heaven and earth becomes recognizable. To meet them is to encounter the place where the covenant is alive.

Then Jesus warns: if salt loses its saltiness, what is it good for? The answer is harsh. Nothing. It is thrown out and trampled. He is not threatening. He is observing. Salt that does not function as salt has lost the only thing that made it useful. The application is direct. Disciples whose lives do not preserve, do not season, do not signal the covenant, are not partly useful. They are useless, in the way that flat water is useless in cooking and unsalted bread is useless on a long journey. The trampling is not punishment. It is gravity. Salt that has stopped being salt has nowhere left to go.

## **The Light of the World**

The second metaphor turns from kitchen and table to lamp and city. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill

cannot be hidden. A lamp is not lit and put under a basket but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.

The light language is more theologically loaded than the salt language, because the Old Testament has been preparing it for centuries. God himself is light. His word is a lamp to the feet of the psalmist. Israel's calling, repeatedly, was to be a light to the nations: a people through whom the surrounding world would see what it could see in no other people, the presence of a God who was actually there. Israel had often failed at this. The disciples sitting on the mountainside were the new light, the renewed people, the lamp finally placed where it could be seen.

The hill the city is on is not chosen by the city. It is where the city was built. The light the lamp gives is not generated by the lamp. It is what the lamp is for. The disciples do not produce the light. They are the placement where the light shines. They have been put on a hill because that is where the light was meant to be seen, and they have been lit because that is what lamps are for.

Then Jesus draws the conclusion. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. Notice what is in this sentence and what is not. Your light shines. Others see your good works. They give glory. Not to you. To your Father. The light is not your own. The works are visible but the credit is not yours. The mission of the disciple is to be visible enough to be seen and transparent enough that what is seen sends the seer past you to God.

# How Torah Works Now

## Not to Abolish but to Fulfill

Before Jesus says a word about murder or adultery or oaths or enemies, he stops and says something the disciples and the crowd needed to hear before he went any further. Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. Truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

This is one of the most important sentences in the New Testament, and it does not say what most modern readers assume it says. Jesus is not saying that he intends to enforce the letter of the Law. He is saying that he intends to be its fulfillment. The Greek word is *plēroō*, the same word used of filling a cup to its rim. The Law had been pointing somewhere. Jesus is the somewhere it had been pointing. The Law is not abolished by the arrival of what it was always preparing the way for. It is filled.

This matters because the antitheses that follow have a way of sounding, on first hearing, like Jesus is overturning Moses. He is not. He is taking each commandment Moses gave and pressing it deeper, into the interior where the commandment had always been aimed. Moses had said: do not murder. Jesus says: do not be angry. Moses had said: do not commit adultery. Jesus says: do not look with lust. The commandments had drawn the outer boundary. Jesus draws the interior.

What Genesis 3 produced was not lawlessness. It was a heart that could keep the letter of the law and still be far from God. The commandments became a way to manage the symptom.

The interior was untouched. The antitheses are the moment Jesus moves the discussion to where the commandments had always been pointing: the heart. Not so that the heart can be condemned. So that the heart can be healed.

## **Murder and Anger**

You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not murder. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.

The first antithesis goes to the place where murder begins, which is not the hand but the heart. Cain did not strike Abel out of nowhere. Cain was angry first. The murder was anger that had taken a body. Jesus is not saying that anger is morally equivalent to murder in every case. He is saying that the road from anger to murder is shorter than people think, and that the law of God is not concerned only with the destination. It is concerned with the road itself.

He gives two practical instructions. If you are bringing your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there. Go. First be reconciled to your brother. Then come and offer your gift. The instruction is precise. Worship is not separable from reconciliation. The hand that reaches for the altar must first reach for the brother. If your brother has something against you, the gift waits. The relationship goes first.

Then: come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court. The picture is concrete. You are walking to court with someone you have wronged. You can settle the matter while you walk, or you can wait until you stand before the judge and let it be settled there. The teaching is not legal advice. It is theological. Reconciliation is something you do on the road, not in the courtroom. Cain

could have settled with Abel before they were in the field together. He did not, and what could have been spoken became what could not be undone.

## **Adultery and Lust**

You have heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

The second antithesis treats lust as a kind of theft conducted by the imagination. The look that consumes another person is not innocent because it never reaches the body. It has already reached where the body is meant to follow. Jesus addresses the inner act with the same seriousness Moses addressed the outer. The seventh commandment is not satisfied by abstention. It is satisfied by a heart that has stopped consuming what does not belong to it.

The hard sayings that follow are deliberately disturbing. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. The same instruction follows for the right hand. Jesus is not commending self-mutilation. The early church understood this. He is naming the seriousness of what is at stake. The cost of stopping the interior sin is real, and the people who imagine that they can keep the inner pattern of consumption forever and still be fine are not paying attention. The hand that has been used for consumption must be willing to lose what feeds the consumption. The eye that has been used for consumption must be willing to look away.

## **Divorce and Creation's Intent**

What Moses permitted in Deuteronomy 24 was a certificate of divorce, given for a hardness of heart that Moses himself names. Jesus traces the issue back to Genesis 2, before any heart was hard. From the beginning it was not so. God made them male and female. A man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.

The word for joined is *suzeugnumi*, yoked together. The yoking is not a contract that lapses when one party defaults. It is an ontological union that the two parties have been gathered into. To put it asunder is not to break a deal. It is to tear apart what has been knit together at a level deeper than the will of the partners. Moses regulated the tearing because the hearts that did the tearing were hard. Jesus is naming what Moses' regulation was an accommodation to.

This is a hard teaching, and Jesus knows it is. But the kingdom restores creation's intent. The marriage covenant is not contractual. It is creational. The disciple is not asked to enforce this teaching against people whose marriages have already broken. The disciple is asked to remember what marriage was always for, and to hold their own marriage in that light, and to receive the people the world has been hard on with the kind of mercy that grace has shown them.

## **Oaths and Edenic Speech**

You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not swear falsely. But I say to you, do not swear at all. Let what you say be simply Yes or No. Anything more than this comes from the evil one.

The third commandment forbade taking the LORD's name in vain. The rabbinic tradition had developed an elaborate system of oaths and counter-oaths, swearing by heaven and earth and Jerusalem and one's head, with various technicalities about which oaths were binding and which were not. Jesus dismisses the whole apparatus. The kingdom does not need oaths to prop up its speech. Yes means yes. No means no. The character of the Beatitudes does not need to swear, because the character of the Beatitudes does not lie.

What is being recovered here is the speech of Eden. In the garden, the man and the woman walked with God in the cool of the day, and there is no record of an oath being sworn. There was no need. Words meant what they said. The serpent introduces falsehood into human speech, and from that day forward, the human race has needed oaths to verify what was being said, because a word alone is no longer sufficient. The kingdom restores the sufficiency of the word. In the kingdom, yes is yes.

## **Retaliation and the Cycle of Violence**

You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

The lex talionis was a limit on revenge, not a license for it. The original purpose of an eye for an eye was to keep retaliation proportional, so that one stolen sheep did not become a blood feud. But over time the limit became the standard, and people read into it the right to take what was owed. Jesus removes the right entirely. The disciple does not retaliate. Not because retaliation is too low a bar but because the kingdom is the place where the cycle of violence stops.

The instructions that follow are deliberately specific. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two. If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other. The Roman soldier could legally compel a Jewish civilian to carry his pack one mile. Jesus says go two. Not because the second mile is owed but because the kingdom does not measure what is owed. The cloak was the outer garment a poor man slept in. The law forbade taking it overnight. Jesus says give it. Not because the law was wrong but because the kingdom does not stop where the law required.

What is being undone here is Cain. The first violence in the human family was retaliation pretending to be justice. The kingdom Jesus is forming is the family where retaliation does not start, because the kingdom remembers what Cain forgot: that the brother is the brother, and the kingdom is not built by trading blow for blow but by absorbing what the world deals out without returning it.

## **Love Your Enemies**

The sixth and final antithesis is the one all the others have been building toward. You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.

The Old Testament had commanded love of neighbor (Leviticus 19) but had not commanded hatred of enemy. The hatred had been added by tradition, and tradition had needed it because loving the enemy is too costly to be sustained by ordinary religion. Jesus restores the original command and extends it to its full reach. The Father in heaven sends rain on the just and the unjust. He makes his sun rise on the evil and

the good. The Father has never been in the business of loving only those who deserve it. The disciple, conformed to the Father, will not be in that business either.

The Greek word is *agapaō*, the verb of self-giving love that does not depend on the worth of its object. Jesus is not asking the disciple to feel warm affection for the enemy. He is asking the disciple to act in the enemy's interest, even and especially when the enemy is acting against the disciple's. To pray for those who persecute you is to bring them into the same posture before the Father in which you bring yourself. Persecution does not change their humanity. It changes only the cost of remembering it.

If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Even tax collectors do that. If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Even Gentiles do that. The kingdom is not measured by reciprocity. The Father gave when there was nothing in his creatures' hands worth taking in return. The disciple, becoming what the Father is, gives the same way.

# How You Practice Godliness

## The Three Secret Rooms

After the antitheses, Jesus turns to the three central practices of Jewish piety: giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting. He addresses all three with the same warning, repeated like a refrain. Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

The Greek word for practice is *poieō*, the ordinary verb for doing. The verb for being seen is *theomai*, the verb that gives English the word theater. Jesus is naming a recognizable trap. Religious practice, conducted with the awareness of being watched, becomes a performance. The performance produces its reward in the watching. The reward is the watching itself. There is no reward left for the watching God to give.

The three sections that follow apply the same logic to the three practices. They share the same structure: when you give, when you pray, when you fast, do it in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Each practice is given a description of what it looks like when it has become theater, and a description of what it looks like when it has been restored to its purpose.

## When You Give

When you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

The trumpet is not literal. There were no trumpets blown when alms were given. Jesus is naming the inner posture of

someone whose giving is loud enough to be heard across the synagogue, even when the giving itself is silent. The Greek word *hupokritēs* originally meant a stage actor, the man who wore a mask and played a role. The hypocrite is not someone secretly evil who pretends to be good. The hypocrite is someone who has confused the role for the person. The praise the hypocrite receives is the entirety of the reward. The audience that mattered most has not been watching, because the hypocrite was watching the wrong audience.

When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. The image is impossible to follow literally. Jesus is using exaggeration to make a point about interior posture. The giving is to be so unattached to your own awareness of yourself as a giver that you barely register it. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you. The reward is real. It just comes from the only audience that matters, and that audience does not require a trumpet.

## **When You Pray**

When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. They love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

The same trap applies. Prayer that is conducted for an audience produces its reward in the audience. There is none left for God to give. But Jesus pushes the warning further. Even the words used in prayer can become a performance, and the alternative he gives is striking. When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

This is the foundation on which the Lord's Prayer is about to be built. Prayer is not a transaction in which the right combination of words unlocks the divine response. It is conversation with a Father who already knows. The reason to pray, given that he already knows, is not to inform him but to be formed yourself in the relationship the prayer assumes. Prayer is not a lever. It is a relationship.

The Lord's Prayer that follows is treated in detail in *The Torah Blueprint, Volume II*, where it is read through Matthew's Pentateuchal lens. The treatment in this book need not duplicate that one. What matters here is what the prayer's placement in the Sermon teaches. The model prayer Jesus gives his disciples is the answer to the question, what does prayer look like when it has been freed from performance? It looks like this. Father. Hallowed. Kingdom. Will. Bread. Forgiveness. Deliverance. Seven petitions. Two halves. The first half about him. The second half about us. And every word capable of being prayed by a child.

## **When You Fast**

When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret.

The pattern is now familiar. Religious practice that wears its costliness on the surface has already been paid in the looking. The disciple fasts the way the disciple gives and prays: in secret, without performance, before the only one whose attention is worth having. The instruction to anoint and wash

is not a prohibition against looking sad when sad. It is a refusal to wear sadness as a costume.

The three practices together describe the inner life of the disciple of the Beatitudes. Giving without trumpet. Praying without performance. Fasting without display. Three secret rooms in which the disciple meets the Father, and in which the relationship that the Beatitudes inaugurated is fed and sustained. The room is secret not because the relationship is shameful but because the relationship is real, and real things do not need an audience.

# Where Your Heart Lives

## Treasure in Heaven

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

This is one of the most famous and least understood teachings in the Sermon. It is not an attack on possessions. It is a description of what happens to the heart when possessions become the object of accumulation. The heart goes where the treasure goes. If the treasure is on earth, the heart settles on earth, and earth will not hold it, because moth and rust and thieves are operating there. If the treasure is in heaven, the heart settles in heaven, and heaven will hold it forever.

The verb for laying up is *thēsaurizō*, from which English gets treasure and thesaurus. The activity Jesus is naming is hoarding, accumulating, building up reserves. The instruction is not to stop earning or to stop saving in any responsible sense. It is to stop hoarding for the wrong purpose. Hoarding for security pretends that the accumulated wealth can keep the soul safe. It cannot. Moth and rust and thieves operate on every earthly hoard ever assembled. The treasures Jesus calls heavenly are the only treasures that finally reach where the heart was hoping the treasure could take it.

The teaching about the eye that follows is connected to this. The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. The Greek word for healthy here is *haplous*, meaning single, undivided. The

healthy eye is the eye that sees clearly because it is not divided. The bad eye is *ponēros*, the same word used for the evil one in the Lord's Prayer. The eye is not literal. It is the inner vision that determines what the whole life moves toward. If the inner vision is clear and undivided, the whole life walks in light. If the inner vision is divided, the whole life walks in darkness, because it cannot see clearly enough to walk anywhere good.

## **Two Masters**

No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

The word for money is *mamonas*, the Aramaic word for wealth, treated in this verse as if it were a personal name. Jesus is not saying that money is evil. He is saying that money behaves like a master when given the chance, and that there is room for only one master in a life. The two-master model does not work. The disciple who tries to serve both will end up serving the one whose claim is louder, and the claim of money is loud. Money does not ask permission. It does not announce itself as a master. It simply organizes the priorities of the heart around itself, and the heart begins to live as money's servant without ever having decided to.

The choice the verse forces is not between money and God in the abstract. It is between two ways of living. One way orients everything around the accumulation, protection, and deployment of money, and treats God as a useful auxiliary. The other way orients everything around God, and treats money as a tool that comes and goes in the service of his kingdom. The two ways look similar from the outside. From the inside, they are entirely different lives.

## **Anxiety, Birds, and Lilies**

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

The connection to what came before is precise. Jesus has just said you cannot serve two masters. Now he names the master that pretends not to be one. Anxiety. Worry. The constant low-grade preoccupation with whether there will be enough. He addresses anxiety not by dismissing it but by relocating it. The disciple is asked to lift the eyes off the spreadsheet and look at the world.

Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Birds are not anxious. Birds are also not careless. They are busy. They forage, they build nests, they raise their young. What they do not do is calculate. They do not sit on a branch and wonder whether God will provide tomorrow's worm. They simply do what birds do, and the worm is provided. The disciple is asked to do what disciples do, and to trust that what is needed will be there.

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Lilies do not anxiously fashion their own splendor. They are clothed by the design of the world they grow in. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

The cursed ground of Genesis 3 was supposed to bring forth thorns and thistles. It did. It still does. The thorns of

agriculture are real, and the sweat the curse promised is still required. But Jesus stands in the middle of a field cursed by Genesis 3 and points at lilies the curse never canceled. They are still there. The cursed ground still grows beauty. The God who clothed the grass has not stopped clothing it. The disciple is asked to receive what the field still produces, with gratitude rather than anxiety, and to remember that the same God is clothing the disciple.

## **Seek First the Kingdom**

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, What shall we wear? For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

The instruction is precise. Not seek only the kingdom. Seek first. The other things are not denied. They are reordered. When the kingdom is sought first, the other things follow in a way that they cannot follow when they are sought first. The reason is not magical. It is that the kingdom-seeking life is given to a Father who knows what is needed and provides it as part of the kingdom's coming. The anxious life is given to itself, and itself is not enough.

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. The day's portion is the day's work and the day's bread. The disciple is asked to live in the day, not in the projection of every possible tomorrow. The Lord's Prayer asked for daily bread. Daily means daily. Tomorrow's bread is tomorrow's. Today's bread is today's, and today's bread is enough for today.

# How You Treat Others

## Judging

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

This is the most quoted and most misunderstood verse in the Sermon. It is not a prohibition on all moral evaluation. It cannot be, because the next paragraph requires moral evaluation: do not give what is holy to dogs, do not throw your pearls before pigs. Discrimination of some kind is necessary for any responsible life. What Jesus is forbidding is something more specific. The Greek verb *krinō* in this construction names a posture, not just an act. To judge in the way Jesus is forbidding is to set yourself up as the standard, to operate from a position of moral superiority that you do not actually occupy, and to apply to others a measure you would not survive being applied to yourself.

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? The image is funny because it is true. The judgmental posture has trouble seeing itself. The speck in the brother's eye is small enough to find a name for. The log in your own eye is large enough to obstruct the very seeing that would have noticed the speck. The instruction Jesus gives is not to ignore the speck. It is to take the log out first. First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

This is not a mandate for permanent inaction. It is the right order. The disciple addresses themselves first, with the same searching attention they had been ready to address the

brother with. When the log has been removed, the speck is now correctly seen, and the disciple is now in a position to help. The help that comes from a removed-log eye is different in character from the help that comes from a log-still-there eye. The first is mercy. The second is condemnation pretending to be mercy.

## **Ask, Seek, Knock**

Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

The three verbs are progressive. Asking is the simplest posture. Seeking adds movement. Knocking adds persistence and the willingness to be heard. All three describe the disciple's posture before the Father, and all three carry the same promise. Every one. No exception. The promise does not say that everyone who asks for the right thing in the right way receives. It says everyone who asks receives. The asking matters more than the asker.

The illustration that follows is family logic. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him? The reasoning is from lesser to greater. Imperfect human fathers give bread when bread is asked for. The Father in heaven, infinitely better than any human father, will not give stones for bread. He gives good things. He may give them in unexpected forms. He may give them on unexpected schedules. He does not give stones.

## **The Golden Rule**

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

The Golden Rule is older than Jesus in negative form. Several rabbis had said: do not do to others what you would not have them do to you. Confucius had said something similar. Hillel had famously said: that which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Now go and learn. Jesus turns the formulation positive. Whatever you wish would be done to you, do also. The negative form forbids harm. The positive form requires action. The disciple is not asked merely to refrain from doing damage. The disciple is asked to take the initiative of love.

And the verse ends with the line that connects this whole social ethic back to the Law of Moses. For this is the Law and the Prophets. The Sermon has been moving through the Law throughout. Now Jesus closes the social section by saying: this is what the Law and the Prophets were always about. Not the regulation of harm, but the cultivation of love. The Sermon is not against the Law. The Sermon is the Law's interior, finally exposed.

## **The Narrow Gate**

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

The image of two ways is older than Christianity. Deuteronomy had set life and death before Israel and called them to choose life. The Sermon picks up the same image and presses it personally. The wide gate and easy way are not paths

of obvious sin. They are paths of obvious comfort, paths that do not require the disciple to enter the inverted kingdom Jesus has been describing. The narrow gate is narrow because the kingdom is narrow. Not many are willing to be poor in spirit. Not many are willing to mourn. Not many are willing to release their right to retaliate. The gate is narrow because the kingdom is unusual.

The warnings about false prophets and the parable of the two builders that follow function as an extended commentary on the narrow gate. There are wolves in sheep's clothing. There are people who will say Lord, Lord on the last day to whom Jesus will say I never knew you. The Sermon is not naive. It does not pretend that everyone who makes a religious claim has actually entered the kingdom. The wide gate has religious traffic on it too. The narrow gate is not signposted by what is professed. It is signposted by what is lived.

# **What You Build On**

## **Two Builders**

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.

The Sermon ends with a parable. Two builders. Two foundations. One storm.

The storm is the same for both. The wise man does not get a kinder weather pattern. The fool does not face a worse one. The same rain falls, the same flood rises, the same wind blows. What differs is what is underneath. The wise man's house has been built on the rock and stays standing. The fool's house has been built on the sand and falls. And the parable ends with a phrase that has the cadence of a slammed door. Great was the fall of it.

## **What the Foundation Is**

What is the rock? Jesus tells us in the same parable. Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them is the wise builder. Hearing alone is not the foundation. Doing alone is not the foundation either, because the parable assumes that the doing flows from the hearing. The foundation is hearing-and-doing, in that order, as one connected thing. The disciple who has heard the Sermon and lives it is on rock. The hearer

who has heard the Sermon and not lived it is on sand. Same words. Different foundations.

This is not a teaching about salvation by works. The whole Sermon has been founded on the Beatitudes, which are pure declarations of grace to people who could not have earned them. The doing the Sermon calls for is not earning. It is the natural consequence of having received. The grace that has reached the heart produces a life. The life that does not yet exist is a sign that the grace has not yet reached as far as it claimed to.

The parable warns the religious self that the curse left intact. There are people who hear teachings about humility and feel humbled. There are people who hear teachings about love and feel loving. The feeling can substitute for the building. The Sermon makes this substitution impossible. The doing is the construction. Without it, there is no house. With it, there is a house that stands.

## **The Storm**

The rain and the flood and the wind are not optional events. They are coming. The parable does not allow the reader to avoid the storm. It only allows the reader to choose the foundation. The disciple who has built carefully and the disciple who has built carelessly are both going to face weather. Only the foundation will determine what happens then.

The Old Testament has prepared this image. The flood that wiped out the antediluvian world was a storm of judgment. The Day of the LORD that the prophets warned about was a storm of judgment. The cosmic shaking the apocalyptic literature describes is a storm of judgment. The parable's storm carries all of these connotations. The day will come

when what has been built will be tested by something far stronger than weather. On that day, only what has been built on the rock will stand. Houses on sand will fall, and the fall will be great, because the storm will not be partial.

## **The End of the Sermon**

When Jesus had finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. The Sermon ends and the response is recorded. They were astonished. The Greek word is *ekplēssō*, literally to be struck out of one's senses. They had heard rabbis their whole lives. Rabbis quoted other rabbis. Rabbis built their teaching on the layers of tradition that had accumulated for centuries. Jesus did not. He spoke in his own name. But I say to you. He did not appeal to authority. He was authority.

The recognition was not yet faith. The crowd had not yet committed to follow him. They were astonished, and astonishment is a beginning, not an end. But the Sermon had landed. They had heard it. The question now was what they would build on.

## **Part One Closing**

The Sermon began with character and ended with construction. It moved from who you are through what you are for, into how Torah works now and how godliness is practiced and where the heart lives and how others are treated, and finally to what you build on. Seven chapters, one Sermon, one picture.

Read backwards from the end, the picture is this. There is a storm coming. There is a way to build that will stand and a way to build that will fall. The way that stands is hearing the words of Jesus and living them. To live them, you must love your enemies, refuse to retaliate, give without trumpet, pray without performance, fast without display, lay up treasure that does not perish, seek the kingdom first, ask of the Father, do to others what you would have done, and enter through the narrow gate. To do all of this requires being a particular kind of person. That person is the person of the Beatitudes. And that person is not the person you can become by trying. That person is the person grace has reached.

The Sermon, taken whole, is the curriculum of the Edenic life. Not Eden as a place to return to, since the gate has been closed and is not opening backward. Eden as a quality of life that the kingdom of God is restoring in the people Jesus is gathering, in the middle of a world still operating under Genesis 3.

From the mountain, Jesus comes down. He walks the roads. He sits at tables. He tells stories. The Sermon described what kingdom life looks like from the inside. The parables, which Part Two now turns to, describe what the kingdom is.

# Part Two

## *Stories That Reveal the Kingdom*

Jesus told stories. He told them often, he told them well, and he told them on purpose. His stories did not illustrate teaching he had already delivered straight. They were the teaching, given in a form that could enter where straight teaching could not. The five chapters of Part Two walk through the parables organized into five clusters: the kingdom hidden, the kingdom inverted, the kingdom sought, the kingdom delayed, the kingdom final. Each cluster names something the kingdom does. Together they describe a kingdom that is being given to the world in the unlikeliest forms, gathering the family the curse scattered.

# **The Kingdom Hidden**

## **Why Begin With Hiddenness**

The first cluster of parables addresses something every disciple has needed addressing. The kingdom of God does not look like a kingdom. It does not arrive with armies. It does not announce itself at gates. It does not take the throne. It comes hidden, the way a seed comes hidden, the way leaven comes hidden in dough, the way treasure stays hidden in a field until someone with eyes to see stumbles on it.

This is one of the hardest things about following Jesus. The kingdom you have committed to does not look like the kingdom you signed up for. It does not produce, on the day you committed, the visible victory you expected. It produces, instead, the slow unseen work of growth, conducted underground, where you cannot watch it, on a schedule that is not yours.

The first cluster of parables is given to disciples who needed to learn this and to disciples who still need to. The kingdom is real. But the kingdom is hidden. And the disciple's part is to plant, and to wait, and to trust the growth they cannot see.

## **The Sower**

A sower went out to sow. As he sowed, some seed fell along the path and the birds came and ate it. Some fell on rocky ground and sprang up quickly but withered when the sun rose, because it had no root. Some fell among thorns and the thorns choked it. And some fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

The Sower is the parable about parables. Jesus tells it first in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8, and immediately afterward

he interprets it for the disciples. The seed is the word of the kingdom. The four soils are four kinds of hearer. The interpretation is unusually direct, because Jesus wants this parable to be the lens for all the others.

What the parable insists on, and what most readers miss, is that the problem is not the seed. The seed is the same in every case. The seed always carries the kingdom. What varies is the soil. The disciple is not asked to evaluate the seed. The disciple is asked to attend to the soil. To be a hearer who lets the word land, takes root, survives the sun, refuses the thorns, and produces grain.

The four soils are not four kinds of unsaved person. They are four conditions of any heart, which can apply to the same heart at different times. There is the path-heart, hardened by use, where the word lands and bounces. There is the rocky-heart, shallow and quick, where the word springs up enthusiastically and dies the moment cost arrives. There is the thorny-heart, divided, where the word grows alongside competing concerns and the competing concerns win. And there is the good-soil-heart, prepared by trouble or by patience or by both, where the word lands and roots and grows and produces.

The Sower also insists on patience. The sower scatters seed indiscriminately. He does not measure each square inch of soil before sowing. He throws seed broadly and trusts that some of it will land where it can do its work. The disciple who sows the word into other lives is freed from the burden of guaranteeing the harvest. The harvest is not the disciple's responsibility. The sowing is.

The Torah Blueprint, Volume II, treats the Sower architecturally as the first of Matthew's seven parables of the

kingdom. The treatment in this book is pastoral. The parable's burden is twofold. The kingdom comes hidden, in the form of a word that must be received. And the soil that receives it is the only soil that produces. The disciple's work is to keep the soil soft.

## **The Mustard Seed and the Leaven**

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it becomes the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.

The two parables are paired. Both speak of small beginnings producing large results. The mustard seed is the smallest of garden seeds, and the plant it grows into is one of the largest. The leaven is invisible inside the dough, and the dough is wholly transformed by it. Both parables answer the disciple's quiet anxiety. Is the kingdom going to amount to anything? Yes. The smallness now is not the measure of the size to come.

The mustard seed image carries an additional weight. The birds that nest in its branches echo Daniel's vision of the great tree under which all the nations find shelter. The kingdom that began with twelve disciples in a backwater province of an outlying empire will eventually shelter the nations. The smallness of the start is not embarrassing. It is the design.

The leaven image is even more subtle. Leaven works by being thoroughly mixed with the dough. It does not announce itself. It transforms by permeation. The kingdom does not transform the world by force. It transforms by permeation.

The disciple is leaven inside the dough, and the dough is the world, and the transformation will not be undone by anything because leaven, once mixed, cannot be unmixed.

## **The Hidden Treasure and the Pearl**

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. On finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Two more paired parables, but the pairing here works by contrast. The first man found the treasure by accident. He was crossing a field, perhaps as a hired worker, and he stumbled on something that had been hidden from everyone else. The second man, the merchant, was looking. He had spent his career searching for fine pearls, and one day he found the pearl that exceeded everything he had been looking for.

The kingdom comes both ways. It comes to people who were not looking for it, who were going about their ordinary business and stumbled on something that was already there. And it comes to people who have been looking their whole lives, who have been arranging their priorities around the search, and who finally find what the search was about. Both kinds of people respond the same way. They sell everything and buy the field. They sell everything and buy the pearl. The cost is total, but the cost is not the point. The point is what they got, which made the selling easy.

This is the response the kingdom produces in those who have actually seen it. The disciple who finds the kingdom valuable does not have to be talked into selling everything. The selling

is not a sacrifice. It is the obvious response to the finding. What you have, in light of what you have found, is no longer worth holding.

## **The Net and the Weeds**

The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad.

The Net gathers everything indiscriminately. The sorting happens at the end, by agents who are not the fishermen, at a time that is not now. This parable is a warning to disciples who imagine that their task is to sort the catch as it comes in. It is not. Their task is to throw the net. The sorting belongs to God, on the day God appoints, by the agents God sends.

The Weeds parable, told earlier in Matthew 13, makes the same point in different imagery. An enemy sowed weeds in a field of wheat. The servants want to pull up the weeds. The master tells them to wait. Pulling up the weeds will damage the wheat. Let both grow together until the harvest. Then the harvesters will sort them.

Both parables address the disciple's impatience. The kingdom contains people who will not, in the end, prove to be of the kingdom. The kingdom contains, even now, mixed company. The disciple is not asked to purify the company. The disciple is asked to be in it, faithfully, until the master sends his sorting agents. The sorting will happen. It is not the disciple's job.

# **The Kingdom Inverted**

## **The Reversal at the Center**

The second cluster of parables addresses what is, finally, the most scandalous feature of the kingdom Jesus is describing. The kingdom does not run on the social logic of the world. The first are not first. The deserving are not necessarily welcomed. The undeserving are. The despised find themselves at the table. The respectable find themselves locked out. The lost are sought, and the found are challenged to rejoice over the seeking.

Every parable in this cluster is built around a reversal that the original audience would have heard as offensive. The Pharisees grumbled at most of them. The disciples often did not understand them. But Jesus told them anyway, because the inversion is not incidental to the kingdom. It is the kingdom. Until the disciple has come to terms with the inversion, the disciple has not yet come to terms with the kingdom.

## **The Good Samaritan**

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.

The lawyer who provoked this parable had asked Jesus a question with a hidden agenda. Who is my neighbor? The question was not innocent. It was asking for a definition that would limit the obligation. If neighbor could be defined narrowly, the lawyer's responsibility could be defined narrowly. The lawyer wanted to know how small a circle he was permitted to draw.

Jesus did not answer the question. He told a story that made the question impossible. The hero of the story is not the priest, who would have been the obvious moral exemplar. The hero is not the Levite, who carried even more religious weight. The hero is a Samaritan, a member of the despised mixed-race population that Jews considered theologically corrupt and ethnically tainted. The lawyer would have been physically unable to say the word neighbor while looking at a Samaritan. Jesus put the Samaritan at the center of his story.

And then Jesus inverted the lawyer's question. He did not ask who was the wounded man's neighbor in the sense of who was nearby. He asked who proved to be the neighbor. The lawyer answered correctly: the one who showed him mercy. He could not bring himself to say the word Samaritan even after he had understood the parable. Go and do likewise, Jesus said. The lawyer had asked for a definition of neighbor. Jesus gave him a definition of neighborliness, and the definition was an action, performed by someone the lawyer would not have included in his original question.

The reversal is exact. The insider has become the outsider. The outsider has become the insider. The boundary the lawyer wanted to draw was the wrong boundary. The boundary Jesus drew was the boundary of compassion, and that boundary cuts across every other boundary the world uses to keep itself organized. The kingdom is the family of those who are willing

to be moved by what they see. The Samaritan saw, was moved, and acted. The priest and the Levite saw, were not moved, and walked on. The kingdom is in the moving.

## **The Pharisee and the Tax Collector**

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.

The parable is short and devastating. The Pharisee was, by every measure his society used, a righteous man. He fasted more than required. He tithed more than required. He kept himself separate from the kinds of people listed in his prayer. The tax collector was, by the same measures, a moral failure. He had collaborated with Rome. He had extorted his neighbors. He had done the things the Pharisee was thanking God he had not done.

And the tax collector went home justified.

The reversal is total. The man whose religion looked like religion did not go home with God. The man whose religion looked like nothing went home with God. The reason is given in the prayers themselves. The Pharisee's prayer is about the Pharisee. He addresses God but talks about himself. He compares himself to others. He inventories his virtues. The tax collector's prayer is about God's mercy. He cannot even raise his eyes. He beats his breast. He asks for nothing more than to be received as he is.

This is the prayer the kingdom answers. The Pharisee did not need anything from God, by his own assessment, except the audience for his self-congratulation. The tax collector needed everything. He went home with everything, and the Pharisee went home with the audience.

## **The Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Lost Son**

The fifteenth chapter of Luke is the most concentrated treatment of the kingdom's seeking love anywhere in the Gospels. Three parables, told one after another, in response to the Pharisees' grumbling that this man receives sinners and eats with them. Each parable is built around something lost and something sought.

The first parable is the Lost Sheep. A man has a hundred sheep and loses one. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing, and calls his friends and neighbors to celebrate with him. The math is striking. One in a hundred. The shepherd does not write off the one because the math is favorable. He goes after the one. The one matters because the one is one. Not a percentage. A sheep.

The second parable is the Lost Coin. A woman has ten silver coins and loses one. She lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and seeks diligently until she finds it. The math has shifted. One in ten. And the search is more intense. She lights a lamp. She sweeps. She is in the middle of her own house, and yet she has to look hard, because what is lost is hidden. When she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors and rejoices.

The third parable is the Lost Son. The math has shifted again. One in two. And the seeking takes a different form, because the lost item is not a sheep or a coin but a person, and a person

cannot be sought the way a sheep can. A person has to come home of their own accord, or rather, has to be made willing to come home by something the parable calls coming to himself. The younger son demands his inheritance, leaves for a far country, squanders everything, hires himself out feeding pigs, and finally, in his hunger, comes to himself. He rehearses a confession on the road. He plans to ask to be received as a hired servant. He never gets to deliver the speech. The father sees him while he is yet a great way off, runs to meet him, embraces him, and interrupts the prepared confession with celebration.

The Torah Blueprint, Volume IV, treats this parable at length and adds the deeper reading: the Son who tells the story is also the Son who left the Father's house, entered the far country the children of Adam had wandered into, and bore there what they had inherited so that the running father's welcome could be a real welcome and not sentimentality. The treatment in this book names the parable's surface gift: the Father runs. The first move belongs to the one who has been waiting. The disciple does not have to construct the welcome. The welcome is already running.

And the elder brother. He is at the end of the parable, refusing to come into the celebration. He has been in the father's house all along without knowing the father. He has served, he has obeyed, he has not run off, but he does not understand the father's heart. When the celebration begins, his anger reveals what his obedience had been hiding. The father comes out to him too. The parable ends with the father pleading. We do not know what the elder brother decides. The Pharisees who first heard the parable were the elder brother. Jesus left the ending open because he was leaving the answer to them.

## **The Great Banquet**

A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, Come, for everything is now ready. But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused. Another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused. Another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.

The master is angry. He sends the servant out to bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame from the streets and lanes of the city. There is still room. He sends the servant out again, this time to the highways and hedges, the place where travelers and the homeless are found. Compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.

The reversal is harsh and exact. The originally invited guests, who were the natural beneficiaries of the master's hospitality, are absent because they preferred their fields and their oxen and their domestic concerns to his banquet. Their excuses sound reasonable. They do not sound like rebellion. But the absence is the rebellion. The master's banquet has been valued at less than a field, less than a team of oxen, less than a wife. The seats they vacated are filled by people who would never have been invited under normal protocols. The kingdom's table is filled, and it is filled by surprising people.

## **The Rich Man and Lazarus**

There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs

came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.

This is the parable of inversions made visible. The rich man, whose name we do not know, lived in luxury within sight of a beggar he never noticed. Lazarus, whose name we do know, lived in agony at the rich man's gate. The rich man's wealth did not require him to be cruel. It required him only to be inattentive. He simply did not see Lazarus. The poor man at the gate was part of the landscape, like a wall or a stone.

And then the inversion arrives. Both men die. Lazarus, who had been ignored in life, is honored in death, carried by angels to the place of comfort. The rich man, who had been honored in life, finds himself in torment, looking up across an unbridgeable gulf at the man he had not noticed. The reversal is permanent. The chasm cannot be crossed in either direction.

The rich man begs for a sign to be sent to his five brothers, that they may not also come to this place. Abraham says, they have Moses and the Prophets. Let them hear them. The rich man insists, no, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent. Abraham answers, if they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead. The parable ends with that line, and the line is freighted. Someone is about to rise from the dead. The Pharisees who are listening will not be convinced.

The parable's burden is double. First: the inversion is real. The kingdom does not measure people by what they have. It measures by whether they noticed those who had nothing. Second: warning has already been given. The man who has

not learned to see Lazarus by reading Moses and the Prophets will not learn to see him by encountering a man risen from the dead. The seeing is not produced by the spectacle. The seeing is produced by hearing the word of God and letting it land.

## **The Vineyard Workers**

The kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. He went out at the third hour and the sixth hour and the ninth hour and even at the eleventh hour and hired more workers. When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.

Each worker received a denarius. The ones hired at the eleventh hour, who had worked one hour, received a denarius. The ones hired at dawn, who had worked twelve hours in the heat, received a denarius. They grumbled. The master answered: Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?

The parable is offensive on first hearing because it offends the ordinary logic of fairness. Equal work for equal pay is the foundation of every functioning labor market. The vineyard owner pays unequal work with equal pay, and the workers who worked twelve hours feel cheated. They are not. They received what they were promised. The eleventh-hour workers received more than they earned. That is what offends the twelve-hour workers, and that is the kingdom.

The kingdom is the place where the late arrivals receive what the early arrivals received. The thief on the cross received paradise after a few moments of belief. The disciples who had followed Jesus for three years received paradise after lifetimes of struggle. The denarius is the same. The early arrivals are not cheated. The late arrivals are not docked. The vineyard owner is generous in the way only the vineyard owner can be generous, and the early arrivals are asked to receive his generosity to others as the same generosity they received themselves.

# **The Kingdom Sought**

## **Why Seeking Is Not Earning**

The third cluster of parables addresses something that the first two have left implicit. The kingdom comes hidden, and the kingdom is inverted, and yet the kingdom must also be sought. The disciple is asked to ask, to seek, to knock. There is something the disciple does that the kingdom invites and rewards.

This sounds, at first hearing, in tension with what the first two clusters established. If the kingdom comes by grace and goes to the unlikely, why is the disciple asked to seek? The answer is in the difference between earning and asking. The kingdom is never earned. It is always given. But it is given to those who ask, who seek, who knock, because the asking is the form of receiving. The Pharisee in chapter two went home empty because he asked nothing. The tax collector went home filled because he asked. The seeking parables are about that asking, and they are about the persistence the asking sometimes requires.

## **The Persistent Widow**

He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. There was a widow in that city who kept coming to him, saying, Give me justice against my adversary. For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.

And the Lord said, Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

The parable is built on a contrast that operates by lesser-to-greater logic. If even an unjust judge will eventually grant justice to a widow who refuses to stop asking, how much more will the just God grant justice to his own people who cry to him? The judge gives in because he is worn down. God responds because he is good. But the widow's role is the same in both cases. She does not stop asking.

The parable's burden is unmistakable. Jesus told it specifically, the text says, so that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. Persistence in prayer is not a way of overcoming reluctance in God. It is a way of remaining in the relationship that prayer assumes. The widow keeps coming because she cannot win her case any other way. The disciple keeps asking because the kingdom is not gained any other way. Asking is not the price of admission. It is the form admission takes.

The closing question is haunting. When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? Faith here is not belief in propositions. It is the persistent asking that the parable has just described. Will the Son of Man find people who are still asking when he returns? The question is not rhetorical. It is a warning. The temptation to lose heart is real. The disciple is being warned in advance and equipped in advance with the parable's reminder.

## **The Friend at Midnight**

Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him; and he will answer from within, Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs.

This is a humorous parable that lands a serious point. A man has unexpected company. He needs bread to host them. He goes to a friend's house in the middle of the night. The friend is annoyed. The household is asleep. Getting out of bed in a one-room peasant house wakes everyone. The visitor at the door is making the request impossible to honor. But the parable says he will get the bread anyway, because the asker keeps asking.

The Greek word for impudence is *anaideia*, which carries the sense of shameless persistence. The asker does not give up because the friend is annoyed. He keeps asking because his need is real. The friend, who would have refused for the sake of friendship alone, gives in for the sake of being left alone.

Jesus' application is direct. Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. The same lesser-to-greater logic operates here. If a reluctant friend gives bread to a shameless asker, how much more will the Father give to his children who ask? The asking is the operative element. The kingdom does not arrive at the disciple who has not asked. The kingdom arrives at the disciple who keeps asking.

## The Two Debtors

A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more? Simon answered, The one, I suppose, for whom he canceled the larger debt. And he said to him, You have judged rightly.

This is the shortest parable in the cluster, but it carries the cluster's heart. Jesus tells it to Simon the Pharisee at whose dinner a sinful woman has just anointed Jesus' feet with her tears. Simon is silently judging Jesus and the woman. Jesus reads his thoughts and tells him this parable. The two debtors. One owes ten times what the other owes. Both are forgiven. The one forgiven more loves more.

The parable is about the woman, but it is not only about the woman. It is about Simon. Simon's failure to extend hospitality to Jesus, while the woman extended extravagant hospitality, is the visible expression of an invisible reality. Simon does not love much because he does not feel forgiven much. The woman loves much because she has felt forgiven much. The seeking the parable describes is the seeking of mercy, and the seeking is proportional to the awareness of need.

This connects directly to the seeking parables. The disciple who knows their own need will seek harder. The disciple who has minimized their need will seek less. The disciple who is in a state of self-congratulation will seek nothing at all. The kingdom comes to the disciples whose seeking is fueled by an honest reckoning with their need for what only the kingdom gives.

# **The Kingdom Delayed**

## **Why Delay Is Not Absence**

The fourth cluster of parables addresses the longest stretch of the disciple's life. The interval between commitment and completion. The time between the kingdom's first arrival and its final consummation. This time is the time we are now living in, the time the disciples after the resurrection were also living in, the time the church has been living in for two thousand years. It is the time of waiting, and it is longer than anyone expected.

The parables in this cluster address the question that long delays produce. Where is the master? Why has he not returned? Has he forgotten? And the parables answer the question by reframing it. The master has not forgotten. The master has placed responsibility in the hands of his servants and is waiting to see what they do with it. The delay is not absence. The delay is the period of stewardship.

## **The Talents**

A man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

A talent was an enormous sum, equivalent to about twenty years' wages for a laborer. The master is entrusting genuine

wealth to his servants, with no instructions other than implicit. They are to do something with it. They are not asked to preserve it intact. They are asked to put it to work. The first two servants do exactly that. The third does not.

When the master returns, the first two servants present their gains. The master says to each: well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master. The reward is not proportional to the size of the original entrustment. It is proportional to the faithfulness of the use. Both servants doubled what they were given. Both receive the same commendation.

The third servant has a different story to tell. He buried the talent in the ground. He explains his reasoning: I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed. So I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.

His reasoning is a window into his soul. He has misread the master entirely. The master is not hard. The master has just entrusted enormous wealth to servants without supervision, with the implicit expectation that they would put it to work. That is not the action of a hard man. It is the action of a generous one. The third servant's view of the master has produced his fear, and his fear has produced his inaction. He has buried the gift the master meant to multiply.

The master's response is severe. You wicked and slothful servant. You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. Take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. The

judgment is not arbitrary. It is the natural consequence of having misunderstood the master and acted on the misunderstanding.

The parable's burden is direct. The disciple has been entrusted with something. The disciple is expected to put it to work. The delay is the period of investment. The master will return, and the return will involve an accounting. Faithfulness is what is rewarded. Inaction, justified by a misunderstanding of the master's character, is what is judged.

## **The Ten Virgins**

The kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept.

The bridegroom is delayed. This is the parable's central premise. The wedding party expects him at a particular hour. He does not come at that hour. The midnight cry goes out: here is the bridegroom; come out to meet him. The wise virgins trim their lamps and meet him with light. The foolish virgins discover, too late, that their oil has run out. They run to buy more, but by the time they return, the door is shut. They knock and call: Lord, lord, open to us. The answer is terrible: Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.

The parable's surface point is preparedness. The wise carried extra oil. The foolish did not. But the deeper point is patience. The reason the foolish virgins ran out of oil is that the bridegroom was delayed, and they had not prepared for delay. They had prepared for arrival on schedule. The wise had prepared for arrival on whatever schedule the bridegroom

chose, including a schedule that demanded more than expected.

This is the parable for the church in the long stretch. The bridegroom has been delayed, by the church's reckoning. He has not come on the schedule the early disciples expected. He will come on a schedule he chooses, and the disciples who have not prepared for the length of the wait will find themselves running for oil at the wrong moment.

Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour, Jesus says. The watching is not anxious. It is faithful. The disciple lives ready, today, for the bridegroom's arrival, and prepared, simultaneously, for his delay. Both readinesses are necessary. One without the other produces either panic or complacency.

## **The Faithful and Wise Servant**

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. But if that wicked servant says to himself, My master is delayed, and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know.

This parable, like the Talents, addresses the long delay. The faithful servant is the one who continues doing what the master assigned him to do, on the assumption that the master will return when the master chooses. The unfaithful servant interprets the delay as an opportunity for license. The master is delayed; therefore the master is essentially absent; therefore the household is mine to abuse. The reasoning is precise and disastrous.

The faithful servant gives the household their food at the proper time. The work is unglamorous. There is no audience watching. The household is fed because the household needs feeding, and the master left this servant in charge. The reward, when the master returns, is significant: the master will set him over all his possessions. But the work, in the meantime, is feeding people meals on schedule. That is what faithfulness looks like in the time of delay. It looks like ordinary, daily, unwatched competence.

The unfaithful servant's career goes the opposite direction. The master comes when he is not expected, finds the household in disarray, and the consequences are severe. The parable closes with a phrase that has echoed through Christian preaching for two thousand years: weeping and gnashing of teeth. Not because the master enjoys judgment, but because the servant who interpreted delay as license has constructed his own destruction.

## **The Unjust Steward**

A rich man had a manager who was reported to him as squandering his possessions. He called him in and said, What is this I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager. The manager said to himself, What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.

He calls in his master's debtors one by one. He asks each one how much they owe. He has each one rewrite their bill for less than they owed. The first owed a hundred measures of oil; he writes fifty. The next owed a hundred measures of wheat; he

writes eighty. By the time the master discovers what has happened, the manager has used the master's own resources to win friends who will receive him after his dismissal.

And the master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. This is the parable's stunning twist. The manager has been shrewd, in a way that even the master must respect. He has used his short window of authority to buy a future for himself. Jesus' application is precise. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

The application is not a commendation of dishonesty. It is a challenge. If a dishonest manager can use his temporary authority to secure his future, surely the disciples of the kingdom can use their temporary resources to secure theirs. The wealth is unrighteous because all earthly wealth carries the taint of being temporary, fading, perishable. But that wealth, in the meantime, can be put to kingdom use. Friends made through generosity now will receive the disciple into the eternal dwellings later. The disciple, in the time of delay, is given something to do with what they have.

## **The Rich Fool**

The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops? And he said, I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry. But God said to him, Fool. This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So is

the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.

This is the parable for the disciple who has misunderstood what the time of delay is for. The rich fool thought the time of delay was for accumulation, for personal security, for ease. He was wrong. The time of delay is the time of stewardship, of investment in the kingdom, of preparation for the master's return. The fool has prepared abundantly for himself, and that preparation has counted for nothing in the only accounting that matters.

The contrast with the faithful servant could not be sharper. The faithful servant feeds the household at the proper time. The fool builds bigger barns to store what was never his to keep. The faithful servant is rewarded with greater stewardship. The fool dies and leaves it all behind, and the question echoes: whose will it be? Not yours. You did not own it. You were holding it. You misunderstood what holding it was for.

# **The Kingdom Final**

## **Why End With Sorting**

The fifth and final cluster of parables addresses the day the others have been pointing toward. The day of sorting. The day when what has been mixed is unmixed. The day when the wheat and the weeds are separated. The day when the net's catch is divided. The day when the sheep and the goats stand on opposite sides of the throne.

This is the cluster modern readers are most likely to skip and least likely to want to face. It contains the hardest words Jesus ever spoke. It does not soften them. It does not negotiate them. The parables in this cluster describe a final reckoning, and the reckoning is real. The disciple is asked to take it seriously, not because Jesus enjoys threats, but because the alternative to taking it seriously is to live as if the kingdom did not finally matter.

The kingdom finally matters. That is the burden of the fifth cluster. The kingdom's hidden growth, surprising inversions, persistent seeking, and patient stewardship are all building toward something. They are building toward a final separation between what has actually been gathered into the kingdom and what has remained outside it. The separation has been gathering all along. The day will come when it is made visible.

## **The Sheep and the Goats**

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the

goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.

This is the parable of final judgment, and it is the most theologically demanding parable Jesus ever told. It is in Matthew 25, immediately following the Talents and the Ten Virgins, and it is the climax of the Olivet Discourse. The Son of Man sits on his glorious throne. All the nations are gathered. The separation begins.

To the sheep on his right, the king says, Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. The righteous answer with bewilderment: Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the king answers, Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.

Then he turns to the goats on his left and pronounces the inverse judgment. The goats also answer with bewilderment. They had not seen him hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison. The king answers, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.

The parable's shock is double. First, the criterion of judgment is not religious profession. It is not theological correctness. It is not even, on its surface, conscious discipleship. It is action toward the least, the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned. Both the sheep and the goats

are surprised by the criterion. Neither group recognized that they were dealing with the king.

Second, the king identifies himself with the least. He does not say the sheep were good people who happened to help the poor. He says the sheep were people who fed him, clothed him, welcomed him, visited him. The least are not just objects of charity. They are the king in disguise. The king has been everywhere all along, embedded in the people the world has overlooked. To miss them is to miss him.

This is the parable that has shaped Christian social ethics more than any other. The Christian tradition of caring for the poor, the sick, the prisoner, and the stranger is not an addendum to discipleship. It is the marker of discipleship. The kingdom is not honored by professing it correctly. It is honored by feeding the hungry one who turns out to be the king.

And the parable's final judgment is not negotiable. The sheep go into eternal life. The goats go into eternal punishment. Both destinations are described in the same sentence with the same word, eternal. The parable does not soften this. It does not allow the reader to imagine that the punishment is temporary. It says the punishment is eternal, and the disciple is asked to receive that as fact.

## **The Wedding Garment**

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son and sent his servants to call those who were invited. When the originally invited refused to come, the king sent his servants out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. The wedding hall was filled with guests.

But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.

This is one of the harder parables in the cluster. The man without the wedding garment was, like the others, gathered in from the streets. He did not buy his way to the feast. He was invited. But he came on his own terms. He came without the wedding garment that the king's hospitality would have provided. He came as if his own clothing were sufficient. The king's question is not rhetorical: how did you get in here without a wedding garment? It exposes a refusal. The man chose to come without the garment that was offered.

The wedding garment is, in early Christian reading, the righteousness of Christ. The man at the wedding has refused the only clothing the kingdom provides. He has come trusting his own. The judgment is severe because the refusal is severe. The kingdom welcomes the unworthy. The kingdom does not welcome the self-clothed. The disciple is asked to come naked and accept the garment, not to come in the garment of their own making.

## **The Wicked Tenants**

There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent

other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, They will respect my son. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance. And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Jesus tells this parable in the temple, days before his crucifixion, in front of the Pharisees and chief priests who would shortly arrest him. They knew what the parable meant. They are the wicked tenants. The vineyard is Israel. The servants are the prophets. The son is the one who is telling the parable, and they are about to do exactly what the tenants in the parable do.

The parable predicts the cross and announces the consequence. What will the master do to those tenants? Jesus asks. He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons. The kingdom will be taken from the original tenants and given to others. The new tenants will produce the fruit the original tenants refused.

The parable closes the cluster of finality with a specific theological move. The judgment falls on those who refused the master's representatives, including and especially the master's son. The kingdom does not stay with those who reject the king's authority. It moves. The original tenants lose what was never theirs to keep. The new tenants receive what they did not earn.

## Part Two Closing

Five clusters. Thirty parables, give or take. One kingdom, told from the inside.

The kingdom is hidden. It comes in seeds and leaven and stumbled-on treasure. The disciple is asked to plant, to wait, to receive. The kingdom is inverted. It welcomes Samaritans and tax collectors and prodigal sons and the eleventh-hour worker, and it is built on a logic that the curse-shaped world finds offensive. The kingdom is sought. It is given to those who ask, who keep asking, who refuse to stop knocking. The kingdom is delayed. It calls the disciple to faithful stewardship over time, with no audience watching, with the master's return on a schedule he chooses. The kingdom is final. It will arrive at a sorting that has been gathering the whole time, and the criterion of sorting is the kind of life the kingdom has been producing in those it has gathered.

And the kingdom, taken whole, is the family the curse scattered, being gathered. That is what the parables describe. The Father who runs to meet the prodigal. The shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine. The woman who sweeps the house for the coin. The Samaritan who stops by the side of the road. The widow who keeps coming. The friend who keeps knocking. The vineyard owner who pays the eleventh-hour worker the same wage. The king who recognizes himself in the least.

From the road and the table, Jesus moves to the Upper Room and the Mountain of Olives. The walking is over. The cross is two days away. He gathers his closest followers around a table for one last meal, and what he says to them at that table and in the hours following is the most concentrated body of teaching he ever delivered. After the resurrection, on a different mountain, he commissions them to take what they

have heard out into the world. Part Three is the farewell and the commissioning, side by side.

# Part Three

## *Words from the Upper Room and the Mountain of Olives*

There comes a point in any teacher's career when the time for ordinary teaching is over and the time for final teaching has arrived. The teacher knows the parting is coming. The students do not yet fully grasp it. What the teacher says in these last sessions has a different weight from anything said before. The students will replay it for the rest of their lives. Jesus arrived at this point in the last week of his earthly life. He had taught for three years. He had preached the Sermon. He had told the parables. He had performed the signs. Now he was in Jerusalem, and the cross was a few days away. The five chapters of Part Three walk through what he said in this final week and the days that followed. The Upper Room foot washing and new commandment. The Way, the Vine, and the Helper. The High Priestly Prayer. The Olivet Discourse. The Commissioning. Five chapters covering the most theologically dense and pastorally tender teaching Jesus ever delivered.

# **The Last Teaching Begins**

## **The Foot Washing**

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, Jesus rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

John gives us the foot washing in slow motion, with theological significance loaded into every gesture. Jesus knew his hour had come. He knew the Father had given all things into his hands. He knew he had come from God and was going back to God. With this knowledge, with all authority, with full awareness of who he was, he rose from supper, laid aside his outer garments, took a towel, knelt down, and began washing feet.

This is the most counter-intuitive act in the entire ministry of Jesus. Foot washing was the lowest of household tasks, performed by the lowest household slave. Roman culture considered it so demeaning that even slaves could refuse it; only the lowest were assigned to it. Jewish disciples were forbidden from washing the feet of their rabbis, because the act was too humiliating for the disciple. And yet here is the rabbi, kneeling in front of the disciples, washing their feet himself.

Peter speaks for everyone. Lord, do you wash my feet? Jesus answers, What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand. Peter pushes back. You shall never wash my feet. Jesus answers, If I do not wash you, you have no share with me. Peter relents and overcorrects. Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head.

Peter's first instinct, refusal, is the disciple's natural response. The teacher should not be doing this. The order is upside down. Jesus rejects the refusal. The order has been upside down all along, and Jesus has come to set it right by inverting the inversion. The teacher is the servant. The Lord is the foot-washer. The Master kneels.

Peter's second instinct, overcorrection, is the disciple's other natural response. If the foot washing is meaningful, do it more. Wash everything. Jesus rejects this too. The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. The disciples have already been bathed. What they need is the daily attention to the dust that the road has put on them. Not a fresh baptism. The ongoing washing of one another's feet.

## **A New Commandment**

When Jesus had finished washing their feet, he sat down again and said, Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. A servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

The lesson is direct. The disciples are to wash one another's feet. Not literally, primarily, although the literal practice has

been preserved in some Christian traditions. The figurative meaning is the operative one. The disciple is to do for other disciples what Jesus has just done for them. The lowest task. The personal service. The willingness to be the one who kneels, even when the task could fall to anyone else.

Then Jesus extends the lesson into a new commandment. A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

The commandment to love is not new in itself. Leviticus 19 had already given it. What is new is the standard. Just as I have loved you. The disciples are not asked to love each other in the ordinary human way. They are asked to love each other the way Jesus has loved them. The way he has just demonstrated, kneeling with the towel and the basin. The way he is about to demonstrate, on the cross.

And the consequence is large. By this all people will know that you are my disciples. The world's recognition of the disciples will not be by their doctrine, by their religious rigor, by their organizational success. It will be by their love for one another. The community Jesus is forming will be visible to outsiders by the quality of love that operates inside it. The early church, in its first centuries, was famously known for this. Pagans observed Christians and remarked, see how they love one another. The community's love was its evangelism.

## **Judas**

Before the foot washing is fully complete, the narrative pauses for the betrayer. Jesus, having known from the beginning who would betray him, has nonetheless washed Judas's feet. The text is careful about this. He had washed all of them. Including

the one who was about to leave the room and go to the chief priests.

This is one of the most haunting details in the Gospel. The traitor's feet were washed too. The kindness was extended to the one who had already decided to use the kindness against him. Jesus loved his own to the end, and his own included Judas, even as Judas was preparing to walk out into the night.

The text says, after Judas had received the morsel of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, What you are going to do, do quickly. Judas left immediately. And it was night. John adds the three words for theological reasons. Judas walked out into the night. The disciple who had been around the light for three years walked away from the light into the darkness, and the darkness was both literal and spiritual. The Upper Room continued in light. The streets outside were dark.

# **The Way, the Vine, and the Helper**

## **Let Not Your Hearts Be Troubled**

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

John 14 begins with a pastoral note. The disciples are troubled. Jesus has just told them he is going somewhere they cannot follow. He has just told them one of them will betray him. He has just told Peter that Peter will deny him three times before the rooster crows. The Upper Room is heavy with bad news. And Jesus addresses the trouble directly. Let not your hearts be troubled.

The instruction is paired with a reason. There is a Father's house. There are many rooms in it. Jesus is going to prepare a place there. He will come again and take them. The destination is not in question. The path between here and there, with its betrayal and denial and crucifixion and three days in the tomb, is in question. But the destination is sure.

Thomas asks the disciples' question. Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way? Jesus answers with the sixth I AM statement. I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

This is one of the most concentrated theological statements in the New Testament. Jesus is not saying he points the way. He is saying he is the way. The path to the Father is not a doctrine, a system, a set of practices. It is a person. The disciple comes to the Father by coming to Jesus, and by being brought, with

Jesus, where Jesus has gone. The way and the destination are unified in the one who is going first.

Philip, hearing this, asks for what Philip thinks would settle everything. Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us. Jesus answers with another concentrated statement. Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. The Father is not something else, somewhere else, that the disciples need to add to their experience of Jesus. The disciples have been with the Father this whole time, in the person of the Son.

## **The Helper**

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

The Greek word is *parakletos*, which carries layered meanings. Helper. Comforter. Advocate. Counselor. The one called alongside. Jesus is promising that when he leaves, the disciples will not be alone. Another Helper will come. Another like Jesus, sent by the Father, who will be with them not in the limited way Jesus has been with them but in a deeper way. He dwells with you, and will be in you.

The promise of the Spirit is given here in the Upper Room and unfolded throughout chapters 14, 15, and 16. The Spirit will teach them all things. The Spirit will bring to their remembrance everything Jesus has said. The Spirit will testify about Jesus. The Spirit will convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment. The Spirit will guide the disciples into all truth.

This is one of the most under-appreciated promises in the Gospels for many modern readers. The disciple does not face the post-Jesus world alone. The Spirit comes. The same God who walked with the man and the woman in the cool of the day in Genesis 2 will dwell, after Pentecost, in his people. The presence that the curse barred at the gate of Eden returns, in a deeper form, to live inside those Jesus has gathered.

I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you. The promise is direct. The disciple is not orphaned by the ascension. The Spirit is the form of Jesus' continuing presence with his people, until the day the disciple meets him face to face.

## **The Vine**

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches.

John 15 opens with the seventh and final I AM statement, and the metaphor is sustained at length. Jesus is the vine. The Father is the vinedresser. The disciples are the branches. The fruit comes from the vine, not from the branches. The branches' only task is to remain attached.

The Greek word for abide is *meno*, which means to stay, to remain, to dwell. It is repeated like a refrain through this chapter. Abide in me. Abide in my love. If you abide in my words. If my words abide in you. The verb is not strenuous. It does not describe an effort. It describes a posture. The branch abides in the vine by not separating from it.

The fruit-bearing is the result, not the goal. The disciple does not produce fruit by trying to produce fruit. The disciple produces fruit by remaining in the vine. The fruit is what the vine produces through the branch. The branch's responsibility is the connection. The vine's responsibility is the fruit.

This is liberating teaching. Disciples have often labored under the conviction that they must produce evidence of their faith by manufacturing fruit themselves. Jesus's teaching is the opposite. The fruit comes from the vine, through the branches that have remained attached. The disciple's labor is not the labor of fruit production. It is the labor, if labor is the right word, of staying connected.

Apart from me you can do nothing. The statement is severe and true. Disconnected from the vine, the branch is dead matter. There is nothing the branch can produce on its own. The vine is not optional. The disciple who tries to bear fruit apart from Jesus is attempting an impossibility. The disciple who abides bears much fruit, almost without trying, because the vine is what bears fruit.

## **Sorrow Will Turn to Joy**

A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me. Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

The image is striking. The death of Jesus, from the disciples' perspective, will be like labor pains. Real, intense, all-consuming. But labor pains are temporary, and they end in birth. The cross will end in resurrection. The disciples' sorrow will end in joy that no one will take from them.

The image of birth, applied to the cross, is theologically dense. The cross is the labor that brings a new world into being. The new creation is born through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the labor pains are real, but they are not pointless. They are productive. Something is coming through them, and what is coming will make the pain forgettable.

# **The Prayer Before the Garden**

## **Why John 17 Matters**

Of all the prayers in Scripture, John 17 is the one we are allowed to overhear that no one else was meant to hear. The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 was given as a model for the disciples to pray themselves. The Psalms were given as the prayers Israel was meant to pray. The prayers of various individuals throughout the Bible are reported but were not meant for general circulation. John 17 is different. It is Jesus praying aloud to his Father, in the presence of his disciples, on the eve of his crucifixion. The disciples are allowed to listen. We are allowed to listen with them.

This is the longest recorded prayer of Jesus, and it is the most theologically dense. It is sometimes called the High Priestly Prayer because Jesus is praying as the high priest who is about to offer himself as the sacrifice. The structure is threefold. He prays for himself. He prays for his disciples. He prays for those who will believe through their word, which means he prays for the church through every century, including ours.

To listen to John 17 is to listen to the Son speaking to the Father about the work he came to do, the people he is leaving behind, and the future of the kingdom he is establishing. The disciples are about to face the cross, the empty tomb, the ascension, and the Spirit's coming. Before any of that, Jesus prays for them. The prayer is the bridge.

## **Father, the Hour Has Come**

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him

authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

The first section of the prayer is Jesus praying for himself, and the prayer is striking. He does not pray for deliverance. He does not pray for the cup to pass. That prayer will come later, in the garden of Gethsemane. Here, in the Upper Room, his prayer is for glorification. The hour has come. The cross is the glorification. He is asking the Father to do what the Father has been preparing all along.

And he defines eternal life. Not as endless duration. As knowing. Eternal life is to know the Father, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent. The Greek word is *ginosko*, the verb of personal, relational, intimate knowing, not detached factual knowing. Eternal life is the relationship the Father had with the Son being extended to the disciples through the Son. To know the Father in the way the Son knows the Father is eternal life. The cross is what makes that knowing possible.

The first section closes with Jesus saying, I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. This is the past tense from a perspective that has not yet seen the cross. Jesus speaks as if the work is finished, because in his commitment to it, the work is finished. The cross will make visible what is already inward. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. The Son is asking to return home, to the glory he had with the Father before the foundation of the world. The cross is the way home. The crucifixion is the lifting up.

## **I Have Manifested Your Name**

The middle section of the prayer is Jesus praying for the disciples he is about to leave behind. The intimacy is striking. He has been with them for three years. He knows them. He has named them. He has called them his own, the ones the Father gave him. Now he is handing them back to the Father.

I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

Jesus characterizes the disciples to the Father in terms of what they have received. They have received the name. They have received the word. They have received the truth that the Son was sent by the Father. The disciples are not yet who they will become. They are still going to scatter when the soldiers arrive. Peter is still going to deny him three times. But Jesus describes them in terms of what they have received, not what they are about to fail at. He sees them as the Father will see them through the Son's work.

I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. The prayer is specific. The disciples are the prayer's focus. The world is not excluded forever; that is the third section. But here, the focus is the disciples, because the disciples are the bridge. They are the ones who will carry the message into the world. If they are not held, the world will not hear. The prayer for the world begins with the prayer for those who will represent the world's only hope to the world.

Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. The petition is for keeping. The disciples need to be kept. They are about to face a force that will scatter them temporarily, and then a longer pressure that will threaten them throughout their lives. The Father is asked to keep them. And the keeping has a particular quality: that they may be one, as the Father and the Son are one.

### **That They May All Be One**

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The third section opens with the prayer extending outward. Beyond the disciples to those who will believe through their word. This is us. The church through every century. Jesus is praying for us, by name in his mind, in this prayer in the Upper Room two thousand years ago. He is not vaguely waving toward future believers. He is naming us as the prayer's third object.

And the petition is the same. That we may all be one, as the Father and the Son are one. The unity Jesus prays for is not organizational. It is participatory. We are to be in the Father and the Son the way the Father and the Son are in each other. This is a unity by inclusion in a divine reality, not a unity by ecclesiastical agreement. The disciples will fail at organizational unity. The church will fail repeatedly. But the deeper unity Jesus prays for is the unity that holds despite the organizational failures, because it does not depend on them.

And the consequence: so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The unity of the disciples is the world's evidence

that the Father sent the Son. The world will not be persuaded by religious argument. It will be persuaded by a community whose love is unlike any community the world has produced on its own. The Upper Room teaching opened with by this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. The High Priestly Prayer closes with the same prayer, deepened. The unity of the disciples is the world's evidence that the Father sent the Son.

### **That They May Be With Me Where I Am**

Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

This is the closing petition. Not justification, although justification is implied. Not sanctification, although sanctification is requested. The closing petition is presence. That they may be with me where I am. The Son wants the disciples in his Father's house. He wants them with him. He wants them seeing the glory that has been his from before the foundation of the world.

This is the deepest reach of the prayer. The Son's desire for the disciples is the Father's house. He is preparing a place. He will come again and take them. They will be with him where he is. The exile that began at Eden is finally being undone. The children of Adam, scattered, are being brought home. They will be with him where he is.

# **Words from the Mountain of Olives**

## **A Different Kind of Discourse**

A few days before the Upper Room, Jesus had given another long teaching, in another setting, on another mountain. The Olivet Discourse, recorded most fully in Matthew 24 and 25, is the final extended teaching Jesus gives the disciples before the Passion week begins. They have been admiring the temple. He has just told them it will be torn down, not one stone left on another. They sit on the Mount of Olives, looking across the Kidron Valley at the temple they have just been told is doomed, and they ask the question that begins the discourse. When will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?

The discourse that follows addresses three questions that overlap and interweave: when will the temple be destroyed, when will Jesus return, and when will the age end. The disciples assume the three are simultaneous. Jesus answers in a way that distinguishes them while not separating them entirely. The temple's destruction in 70 AD is one event. His return is another. The end of the age is a third. They share patterns but they are not the same event.

What concerns us in this part of the book is the discourse's pastoral function. Jesus is preparing the disciples for what they will face between his departure and his return. The signs of the end. The temptations toward false hope and false despair. The faithful posture in the long stretch. And finally, in chapter 25, four parables that we have already encountered in Part Two, but which take on a different cast here in their original Olivet setting.

## **Watch Therefore**

Therefore stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

The recurring instruction of the Olivet Discourse is to watch. Not to predict. Not to calculate. Not to read the signs as a code that will yield the date. Watch. Stay awake. Be ready. Live, today, in a way that would not be embarrassing if the Son of Man arrived in the next hour.

This is harder than calculation, because calculation gives the calculator the illusion of control. Watching gives no such illusion. The watcher does not know when. The watcher only knows that whenever it happens, the watcher will be ready, because readiness is a daily condition, not a calculation about a specific date.

The history of Christian apocalyptic prediction is the history of disregarding this instruction. Date setters have come and gone for two thousand years. None has been right. All have been distractions from the actual instruction Jesus gave, which was to watch, not to calculate. The disciple who has read the Olivet Discourse correctly is not the disciple who knows when. It is the disciple who lives ready, today, every day.

## **The Parables of the Olivet Discourse**

The Olivet Discourse closes with four parables that have already been treated in Part Two of this book under the cluster of the kingdom delayed and the kingdom final. The Faithful

and Wise Servant. The Ten Virgins. The Talents. The Sheep and the Goats. In their original Olivet setting they carry a particular urgency, because Jesus tells them as the immediate answer to the disciples' question about when his coming will be and how the long stretch should be lived. The reader who wants the full pastoral treatment of these parables should return to those sections in Part Two. The point here is structural. The Olivet Discourse, after the warnings about false prophets and the signs of the end and the instruction to watch, ends with four parables that show what watching looks like. The faithful servant feeds the household. The wise virgins keep their lamps trimmed. The faithful stewards invest the talents. And the king on his throne separates the sheep from the goats by a criterion that has been operating quietly throughout the long stretch.

# **The Commissioning**

## **After the Resurrection**

Between the Olivet Discourse and the Great Commission, the cross happens. The Upper Room. Gethsemane. The arrest. The trial. The crucifixion. The death. The burial. Three days in the tomb. The empty tomb on the first day of the week. The post-resurrection appearances.

The teachings recorded in the first three chapters of this part were given on the eve of these events. The teaching recorded in this final chapter is given after them. The Jesus who commissions the disciples in Matthew 28 is not the Jesus who knelt with the basin in John 13. He is the same person, but he has done what he came to do. The cross has been borne. The grave has been emptied. The curse has met its undoing.

And the commissioning, when it comes, is the practical question: what now? The kingdom has been proclaimed in the Sermon, revealed in the parables, and prepared for in the Upper Room. The cross has happened. The resurrection has happened. The disciples have seen the risen Lord. What is the next step?

The next step is the Commission. The world.

## **All Authority**

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have

commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Matthew's Great Commission has four movements: an authority claim, a mandate, a method, and a promise. Each is operative.

The authority claim is total. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. This is the claim of cosmic kingship. The cross was not a defeat. It was the coronation. The risen Christ stands as the one to whom every authority answers. Heaven and earth alike. There is no jurisdiction outside his.

The mandate is global. Make disciples of all nations. The word is *panta ta ethnē*, all the peoples, all the cultures, all the language groups. The kingdom that began with twelve disciples in a backwater province is meant for the entire human race. The disciple's task is not to gather a small group of co-religionists. It is to extend the kingdom to every nation, every people, every place.

The method is twofold. Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. The first half is initiation. The second half is formation. The disciple-making is not complete with baptism. It continues into the slow work of teaching, until the new disciple has come to observe what Jesus commanded. The Commission is a marathon, not a moment.

The promise is presence. Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. The Greek is emphatic. *Idou*, behold, an attention-marker. *Egō meth' humōn eimi*, I am with you. *Pasas tas hēmeras*, all the days. *Heōs tēs synteleias tou aiōnos*, until the end of the age. The disciples are not sent alone. The

risen Lord goes with them. Every day. Until the consummation. The Commission ends as the Upper Room ended. With presence. I will not leave you as orphans.

## **The Restoration of Peter**

In John's Gospel, the post-resurrection commissioning is given a different scene. Jesus appears to seven disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. They had returned to fishing. They had caught nothing. He told them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. They caught one hundred fifty-three fish. They came ashore and found him cooking breakfast.

After breakfast, Jesus took Peter aside. Peter, the disciple who had denied Jesus three times around a charcoal fire on the night of the arrest, was now standing by another charcoal fire. The detail is intentional. John uses the same word, *anthrakia*, charcoal fire. It appears only twice in the entire New Testament. Once in the high priest's courtyard, where Peter denied. Once on the beach in Galilee, where Peter is restored.

Three times Jesus asks: do you love me? Three times Peter answers: yes, Lord; you know that I love you. Three times Jesus responds: feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. The threefold question matches the threefold denial. The threefold commission gives Peter back what the denial took.

The Greek wordplay is subtle. The first two times Jesus asks, the verb is *agapas*: do you love me with self-giving love? Peter answers with *philō*, the verb of friendship-love. The third time, Jesus asks with *philō*. Do you love me as a friend? Peter is grieved that the third asking has used the lower verb. He answers, Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you. The grief is not just about the threefold asking. It is about

Jesus meeting him at the level he can manage. Peter cannot yet claim agapē. He can claim philia. Jesus accepts that.

And the commission is the same in both directions. Whatever level of love Peter can give, the commission is the same. Feed the lambs. Tend the sheep. Feed the sheep. The work does not require perfect love. It requires the love that is actually there, given to the one who calls.

Then Jesus says: when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go. This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God. And after saying this he said to him: follow me.

Peter is told he will eventually be crucified. The cost is named. And the same instruction Jesus gave Peter at the beginning is given again at the end. Follow me. The whole arc, from the call by the lakeshore three years before to this restoration by the lakeshore now, is closed with the same two words. Follow me.

## **The Ascension**

Luke records the ascension twice, briefly at the end of his Gospel and more fully at the start of Acts. Jesus leads the disciples out as far as Bethany. He lifts up his hands and blesses them. While he is blessing them, he is carried up into heaven. They worship him and return to Jerusalem with great joy. They are continually in the temple blessing God.

The ascension is the formal end of the earthly ministry. The risen Lord returns to the Father, taking with him the human nature he had assumed at the incarnation. The Son who came from the Father has come into the world; again, he leaves the world and goes to the Father. The journey is complete.

But the journey is not lonely. He brings with him the children of Adam whose far country he had entered. The ascension is not Jesus going home alone. It is the firstfruits of the new humanity returning to the Father, with the rest to follow on the day they meet him face to face.

And the disciples return to Jerusalem with great joy. Not sorrow. Not panic. Joy. They had been told that he would not leave them as orphans. They had been told that the Helper would come. They had been told that he would be with them always. They had heard the High Priestly Prayer and known that they were his, given by the Father, prayed for by the Son, kept by the Father's name. The ascension was not loss. It was the coronation of the one who had been their teacher and was now their reigning Lord.

## **Conclusion: The Curse Undone**

Three volumes. The Sermon. The parables. The final teachings. One thousand pages or so, give or take, walking through the words of Jesus as the slow, deliberate reversal of what Genesis 3 set in motion.

What was the picture, taken whole?

Genesis 3 produced a heart turned inward, a brother turned against brother, a ground turned thorny, a body turned mortal, a gate turned shut. The curse was real. It is still real. The thorns still grow. The ground still resists. The bodies still die. The gate to Eden has not been reopened, and is not opening backward.

But something is happening, and the words of Jesus describe it.

A new heart is being made. The Beatitudes describe it. The Sermon describes its life. The parables describe the family it belongs to. The Upper Room describes how it is fed and kept. The Olivet Discourse describes how it lives in time. The Commission describes how it is multiplied through the nations. The hearts that the curse turned inward are being turned outward, one by one, by grace.

The brothers, separated by Cain's hand, are being reconciled. The new commandment binds them. The foot washing models how. The unity Jesus prays for in John 17 is the goal. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

The ground, still thorny, still produces lilies that no human anxiety can match. The Sermon points at them. The parables tell of seeds and harvests. The disciple is asked to seek first the kingdom, and the daily bread is provided. The cursed ground

is not yet the new heaven and new earth. But the lilies are there. The Father is still clothing the grass.

The body, still mortal, has met the body that died and rose. The cross has happened. The resurrection has happened. The first body has been raised. The rest will follow. The labor pain that was the cross has produced the new creation that the disciples are the firstfruits of. The body that was promised dust has been promised resurrection.

The gate, still closed in one sense, has been opened in another. The Father's house has many rooms. A place is being prepared. The Son went to prepare it. He will come again. The disciple will be with him where he is. The way back to the garden is closed. The way forward to the city, with the garden inside it, is open. The river of the water of life. The tree of life. God dwelling with his people. The curse undone.

And the words of Jesus, which have been the long, slow undoing all along, do not stop. The disciple who has heard them is now also an undoer. The Commission has sent the disciple into the world. The Spirit has come. The risen Lord is with the disciple always. The undoing continues, one teaching, one neighbor, one stranger at the gate, one act of love, one reconciliation, one feeding of the hungry, one welcoming of the lost, until the day the curse is finally and fully undone, and what was lost in Eden has returned, in fuller form, in a city with a garden inside it, where God dwells with his people forever.

This is where the words of Jesus have been heading from the first Beatitude. This is what the disciple has been entering, one teaching at a time. This is the curse undone.

## **A Final Word**

This brings us to the close of the book.

You have walked through the Sermon on the Mount in Part One, the parables in Part Two, and the final teachings in Part Three. You have heard, slowly, the words by which Jesus has been undoing what Genesis 3 set in motion. You have seen the heart turned outward, the family gathered, the kingdom hidden and inverted and sought and delayed and final, the foot washed, the prayer prayed, the disciples kept, the Commission given.

Close this book. Open your Bible. Read Matthew 5, 6, and 7 again. Read the parables. Read John 13 through 17. Read the Olivet Discourse. Read the post-resurrection scenes. Read with the lens this series has tried to give you. The lens of Genesis 3, slowly being undone by the words of Jesus.

And then live what you have read. The Sermon was not given to be admired. The parables were not told to be analyzed. The Upper Room teaching was not preserved to be debated. The Commission was not delivered for the disciple to ignore. The words of Jesus were given so that those who hear them would live them, and in living them, would participate in the slow, deliberate, sure undoing of what the curse set in motion.

The curse is real. The undoing is realer. The cross has happened. The resurrection has happened. The Spirit has come. The Lord is with you always. Go.