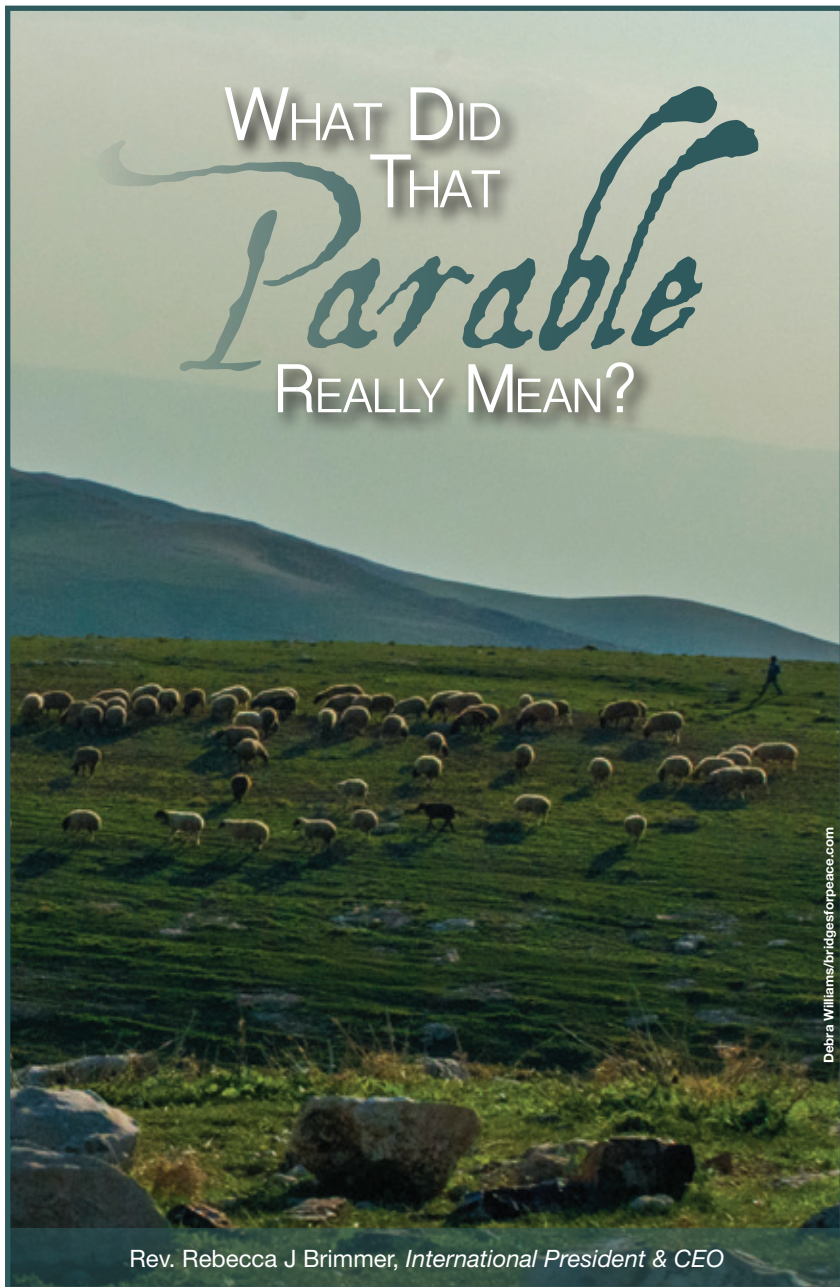


ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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MY HUSBAND IS AN ISRAELI TOUR GUIDE, and he says that parables are stories taught while on the road. I can certainly imagine Yeshua (Jesus) telling stories as He walked with His disciples.

Generally when we think of parables we think of Yeshua's use of them. However, He did not invent the parable. It was a communication tool used by other rabbis of the era. In Hebrew it is called a *mashal* and can mean proverbs, fictional stories, poems, fables, riddles or allegories. David Stern, an authority on rabbinic parables says, "above all else, the *mashal* represents the greatest effort to imagine God in all rabbinic literature."

According to Brad Young, "The Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels loves to use miniature plays to communicate his message. The word-picture of the parable creates a drama that re-describes in clear terms the reality being illustrated. The resemblance between the reality and the illustration makes an instructive comparison."

Parables are stories that illustrate a deeper truth. They are often word pictures. They utilize imagery that is easily understood and may be commonplace. Some have described parables as an earthly story with heavenly meaning. It seems clear that they were a method of communication meant to instruct, to illuminate, to bring a grand or high concept to light using everyday imagery. The parables of Yeshua were entertaining. They grabbed attention. There was generally a shocking element. You might forget a dry sermon but you were unlikely to forget the surprising twists in Yeshua's stories. Let's look a little closer at some of the parables of Yeshua (one from each Gospel).

The Sheep and the Goats

Matthew 25

This parable is part of the Olivet Discourse. The disciples of Yeshua had asked Him, “Tell us when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (Matt. 24:3b). Yeshua answered their question in Chapter 24. In addition He gave teaching about the way we need to act in the end times. There are six parables in Matthew 24–25. These include the budding fig tree, the thief, the steward, the wise and foolish girls, the talents and pounds, and the sheep and the goats.

With the exception of the budding fig tree, I believe all are about how we should act in the end times. The parable of the thief is an injunction to be watchful. The parable of the steward and the talents are instructions about being faithful with the master’s resources. The parable of the virgins is about being prepared. The parable of the sheep and the goats is about the importance of caring for the needy, and the fact that nations will be judged by how they treat the downtrodden.

The word translated “nations” in Matthew 25:32 is the Greek word *ethnos*. It could also mean people groups or tribes. In 1 Peter 2:9, Paul uses the term for Gentile Christians, calling us “a holy nation.”

Yeshua says the people groups, or nations, will be separated into sheep and goat categories at the Judgment. They will be judged according to their actions toward the brethren of Yeshua (Matt. 25:40). Those who provide food, water, clothing, visit prisoners and the sick, or provide hospitality to strangers will be in the sheep category and will “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 25:34). Those who don’t will be on the goat side and, “these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt. 25:46).



Let's think about the context. Yeshua is a first-century Jewish teacher who is answering questions posed by His twelve Jewish disciples. This is before the first Gentiles were welcomed into the "Way." Acts 10 describes how difficult it was to convince Peter to go to Cornelius, the first Gentile to accept Yeshua and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

When these Jewish men, living in a community of faith (Judaism) heard the One they acknowledged as the Messiah speak about His brethren, I am sure they thought He was speaking about the needy among the Jewish nation. Of course believers should follow the principles found here and minister to all those in need around the world. But, I also think that we should anticipate that this also means that the nations (people groups) will be judged for how they treat the Jewish people (the natural brothers of our Jewish Savior). The prophet Joel also speaks about the judgment of the nations (Hebrew *goyim*) and clearly links it to their treatment of "*My people, My heritage Israel*" (Joel 3:2).

This parable also exhibits a primary character trait of God—mercy and compassion. As we follow the Lord in these last days, let's not forget to show His mercy and compassion to those in need.



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The Wicked Husbandmen — Mark 12

The parable of the wicked husbandmen or tenants is found in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 21:33–46; Mark 12:1–12; and Luke 20:9–19). The Christian argument that God has rejected the Jewish people in favor of Christians has been fueled by historic Christian interpretation of this parable.

In the parable Yeshua tells of an owner of a vineyard who leased the vineyard to vinedressers and then went away to a far country for a long time. After a period of time he sent a servant to collect his share of the crop. The tenants beat the servant and sent him away with nothing. He sent another servant who was treated similarly. Finally the owner sent his beloved son, whom they killed. The owner in response destroyed the tenants and gave the vineyard to others.

Yeshua was with the Jewish people in rejecting the corrupt leadership of that generation.

Traditional Christian interpretation treats the parable like an allegory. David Wenham describes the meaning, "...the general drift of the parable is plain. It is the story of God sending first the prophets and then Yeshua to the people of Israel, patiently calling them to 'bear fruit.' It is the story of their violent rejection of that call, culminating in the killing of Yeshua; and it is the story of God taking action to punish Israel and 'to give the vineyard' to others." With this interpretation the "others" are Christians who have now replaced the Jewish people.

I would like to look at this parable from its historical and cultural context, rather than through the lens of later Christian doctrines, often formed by anti-Semitic church leaders.

The Jewish people were living under the oppressive rule of Rome. Herod was the Roman-installed king. Herod controlled the priesthood. He killed the high priest and installed his own (Simeon) and subsequently the office of high priest was purchased using political favors and money. The Sadducean sect of Judaism was in the seat of power. They were minions of Rome. Pious Jews of the time, including Yeshua and His disciples were horrified by the corruption of the holy Temple. According to Dr. David Flusser, the people of Israel were against the corrupt priesthood and Yeshua was in solidarity with the Jewish people in rejecting the corrupt leadership of that generation. We can see the depth of Yeshua's anger by the way He cleansed the Temple not long before teaching this parable.



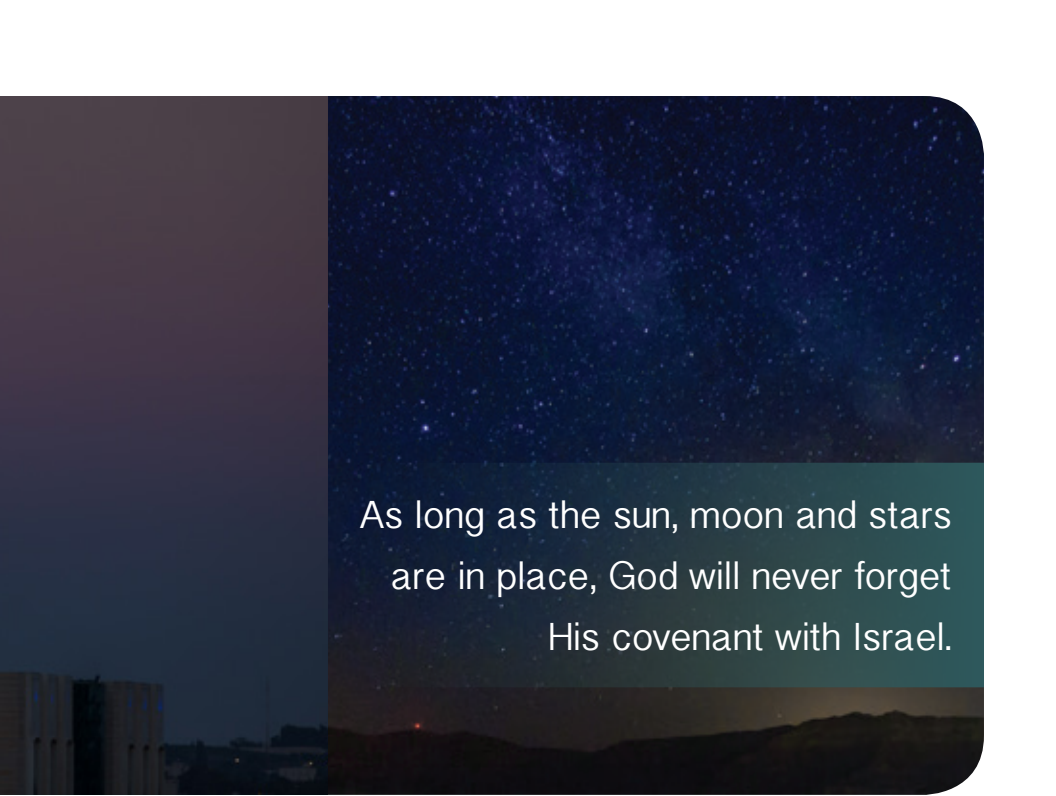


This parable was taught in Jerusalem during the last week before Yeshua's crucifixion. The *Nelson Study Bible* note says, "When Yeshua taught in Jerusalem during His last week, His parables focused on the acceptance or rejection of Him. This time even the priests and Pharisees perceived He was speaking about them. They were stung by Yeshua's parables, and they despised Him and His message." In fact, all three Gospel accounts say that the chief priests and scribes responded angrily because they knew He was talking about them. The Gospel writers do not deny this fact.

The traditional interpretation has to overlook the fact that all of Yeshua's followers were also Jews. In fact it was His Jewish followers who took the Gospel to the known world. Subsequently, all who have faith in Yeshua today received our great gift from the hands of Jewish believers from the first century.

So what did the parable mean to the original listeners? I believe that the vineyard is Israel. Yeshua wasn't speaking against the vineyard. He was speaking against the evil tenants, those who had been given authority in the vineyard—the corrupt priesthood and religious court of the day. Yeshua was predicting that the chief priest and Sanhedrin, in collusion with Roman leaders, would seize and kill Him. They had rejected the Son of God. He was not rejecting the people of Israel, many of whom followed Him. Interestingly, there was no remnant of the Sect of the Sadducees after AD 70.

The prevalent teaching of the historical church that God has rejected the Jewish people is not supported by this parable. Jeremiah said that as long as the



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sun, moon and stars are in place, God would never forget His covenant with them (Jer. 31:33–35). The Apostle Paul said in regards to natural Israel, *“the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable”* (Rom. 11:29).

Places at the Table – Luke 14:7–14

In this very practical parable Yeshua advises how to act at a wedding feast and whom to invite to a feast. In the first half of the passage, He advises not to sit in the places of honor but to take a humble position, and in the second half He advises inviting those whom society could view as less desirable guests. As is common with parables, both pieces of advice may have been shocking or caused the hearers to stop and consider. Not only does He encourage those, who might be deserving of honor, not to expect it, but then He says that we should not show honor to those who can return it—rather we should give honor to those we might consider undeserving.

The setting for the parable is the home of a prominent Pharisee. Luke 14:1 says, *“Now it happened, as He went into the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees to eat bread on the Sabbath, that they watched Him closely.”* The home of this ruler of the Pharisees was most likely a spacious, upper class dwelling. We don’t know if Yeshua was an honored guest or not, but He was certainly a noticed guest since everyone was watching Him. He was also watching the actions of the other guests.

It is possible that in an upper class dwelling they may have been dining at a *triclinium* table. This was a Roman formal dining table composed of three sides in a U-shape. Diners would recline on couches or pillows on the outer sides of the table leaving the center open for the servers. There was a definite order of seating with the most important guests sitting on the left side and the least important on the right side. The first three places on the left were for the host, the honored guest and the best friend of the host. I can picture Yeshua watching those who thought highly of themselves vying for the seats closest to the host. His advice? Take the lowest seats, because it is better to be moved up than to be embarrassed by being asked to take a less important seat. Then He says, *“For whoever exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted”* (Luke 14:11).

In today’s world, humility seems almost a forgotten virtue. We are advised to self-promote and many in prominent positions even hire people to help promote them. In Judaism humility has always been desirable. In fact Moses is described as *“very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth!”* (Num. 12:3).

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain once wrote about humility. “Humility—true humility—is one of the most expansive and life-enhancing of all virtues. It does not mean undervaluing yourself. It means valuing other people. It signals a certain openness to life’s grandeur and the willingness to be surprised, uplifted, by goodness wherever one finds it. I learned the meaning of humility from my late father. He had come over to this country at the age of five, fleeing persecution in Poland. His family was poor and he had to leave school at the age

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— Luke 14:11



True humility is
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of fourteen to support them. What education he had was largely self-taught. Yet he loved excellence, in whatever field or form it came. He had a passion for classical music and painting, and his taste in literature was impeccable, far better than mine. He was an enthusiast. He had—and this was what I so cherished in him—the capacity to admire. That, I think, is what the greater part of humility is, the capacity to be open to something greater than oneself. False humility is the pretense that one is small. True humility is the consciousness of standing in the presence of greatness, which is why it is the virtue of prophets, those who feel most vividly the nearness of G-d.”

In the second part of the parable, Yeshua says that *“When you give a feast invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind...”* (Luke 14:13). I wonder how His host felt about these comments! Probably those attending the feast were prominent people (who expected to sit in good seats at the table). Perhaps it was a poke at His host. I guess we will never know.

I don’t think Yeshua is saying that you should never invite your friends and family, but there is no special reward for doing so—you receive your reward when they return the invitation. When you invite those with needs, the poor, and sick, for example, you can expect a reward—at the *“resurrection of the just”* (Luke 14:14). This reminds me of Matthew 25 when Yeshua says we will be judged by how we treat the least of His brethren. It seems that God feels very strongly about His people showing compassion and love to those in need. James says, *“Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world”* (James 1:27).

James goes on to warn against showing preferential treatment to the wealthy. *“For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, ‘You sit here in a good place,’ and say to the poor man, ‘You stand there,’ or, ‘Sit here at my footstool,’ have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?”* (James 2:2–5).

Every story has a moral doesn’t it? Remember Rabbi Sacks said that true humility is valuing other people. To paraphrase Yeshua, we should allow others to value us and we should value others, even those the world says have little value.

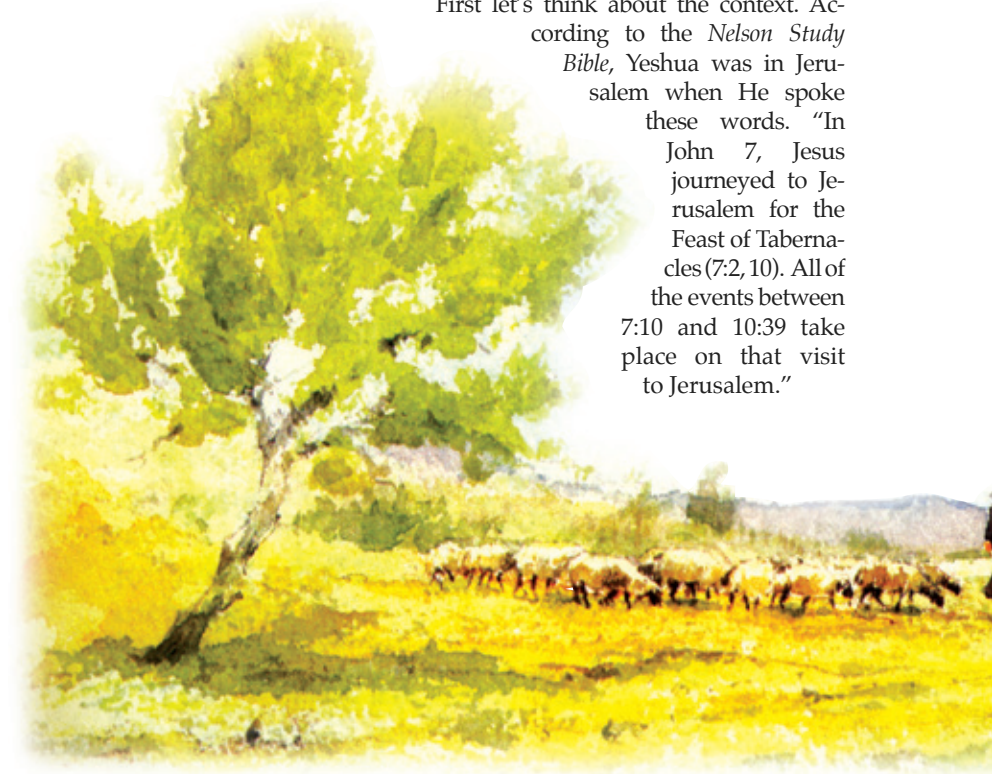
The Good Shepherd – John 10:1–18

The Bible is full of rich imagery to help its readers better understand deep spiritual truths. One of the oft-repeated images is that of a shepherd with his sheep. The prophets spoke of good shepherds and corrupt shepherds. God is referred to as our Shepherd. One of the most beloved of all psalms, by both Christians and Jews, is Psalm 23. It communicates the great care that the Lord has for His people.

In Scripture, leaders are frequently referred to as shepherds. Shepherds were responsible for the well-being of the sheep and, in every way, guarded and provided for them. Using an image such as a shepherd, communicated more than the simple words we read. Instantly, the original hearers of the Word thought of the all-encompassing care that a shepherd would take for this flock. In Israel, the shepherd acted in every way as a leader. The shepherd led the sheep to food and water; he protected against wild animals, inclement weather and unscrupulous individuals.

In John 10 Yeshua referred to Himself as the “good shepherd.” Here Yeshua uses the metaphor of sheep and shepherds to communicate truths about Himself. It is impossible to adequately write about every nuance of this passage, so I have chosen to highlight a few points.

First let's think about the context. According to the *Nelson Study Bible*, Yeshua was in Jerusalem when He spoke these words. “In John 7, Jesus journeyed to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles (7:2, 10). All of the events between 7:10 and 10:39 take place on that visit to Jerusalem.”




Yeshua's disciples were devout Jewish men in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*). They were sleeping in temporary dwellings (huts, booths or tabernacles). They could see the Temple which was on a high place and visible to all.

In John 10 Yeshua talks about being the good shepherd, and contrasts the good shepherd with hirelings. We know from history that the devout Jews of the day were distressed about corruption in the Temple. It seems clear that Yeshua's hearers would have immediately identified the hirelings with the Temple leadership "hired" by Herod instead of the legitimate leadership. It seems likely that they would have thought of the passage in Ezekiel 34.

"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God to the shepherds: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock"...For thus says the LORD God; 'Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day'" (Ezek. 34:2-3,11-13). This prophetic message goes on to tell how the flock will be scattered, and will be re-gathered and fed by God's servant "David," a clear reference to the Messiah.

When Yeshua said, "I am the good shepherd," He was not only assuring them of His deep love and care but He was making clear statements about Himself as Messiah. He says, *"I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own"* (John 10:14). He reminds His hearers that the sheep know their shepherd's voice and he calls them by name (John 10:3). Surely those listening thought of Psalm 23—The Lord is my shepherd.

He goes on to prophesy His death, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep"* (John 10:11). Continuing He says, *"Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have the power to lay it down and the power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father."* (John 10:17-18). This verse is very important. For centuries the Jewish people have been blamed for killing Jesus. Yet, here Yeshua clearly denies that claim. He freely gave His life for the sheep. Even in the shadow of the Temple, and the corruption therein, knowing that "hireling" leaders would conspire with the Romans to kill Him, Yeshua makes a clear statement that His death is the plan of God.



"As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered..."

— Ezekiel 34:12

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One last thought. This happened during *Sukkot*, the time when Israel lived in flimsy huts emphasizing their total dependence on God. Later the Apostle John would write, “*And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God’*” (Rev. 21:3).

Oh the riches to be found in the Word of God. We have barely scratched the surface of four parables. My prayer is that we will have a hunger to understand the truths of God’s Word through the lens of the historic context of the Bible.



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Scripture is taken from the New King James, unless otherwise noted.



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