

that his function for the house of God is the door. We can therefore imagine that our ecclesial door does for us what the doors on our own houses do.

The light

Of what use are the way and the door if we have no light? For the unenlightened, Jesus is still the way and the door, yet they do not know the way and cannot see the door. Jesus describes himself as “the light of the world” in John 8:12. The context

gives us to understand that we use the light to walk in the way of righteousness and obtain life: “Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life”. It is the work and character of Jesus that shines out like a beacon, attracting people to him that they might learn the way, enter through the door, and be saved.

(To be continued)

Bible workshop

X marks the spot

4. Misdirection

Robin de Jongh

MAGICIANS ARE a dull bunch. They play it safe and basically have one ‘magic secret’, using it in many variants in their performances. The secret is simple misdirection. A commotion is made over here while the deception is being done over there. She flourishes her left hand while the right hand makes the switch. He creates a bang and smoke over there to draw eyes away from here.

God sometimes works in a similar way, and Jesus teaches us about it in his parables. There is one particular place where God did this, and one particular parable where Jesus demonstrates it to us. Let’s look at God’s big loud misdirection first, then the parable, and then go through a worked example to see if it applies elsewhere. Then whenever you see misdirection in Scripture you will know that here is a place worth digging for treasure.

Misdirection: smoke at Sinai

When God brought Israel to Sinai He knew full well that they did not really want to know Him. Aaron put it this way to Moses: “thou knowest the people, that they are set on mischief” (Ex. 32:22). So God had to devise a way of separating the bad from the good. He did not want the golden calf worshippers to break through to Him and mock what they did not understand.

The way He did this was to set off the most almighty, fearsome spectacle on the mountain: fire,

smoke, loud noise and shaking ground. So fearful was this misdirection that even Moses almost did not see through it, and said, “I exceedingly fear and quake” (Heb, 12:21)! But remember that Moses did see through it, and he and Joshua did go up to God and did not die. So what was all the commotion about? It was there to misdirect the people, because they were interested only in idolatry, not to get to know the true God (Ex. 32:1). And to this people God gave a set of laws that punished most transgressions with death—or so it seemed to the people.

The hidden truth with Moses

But in the other hand, quietly and without spectacle, Moses spoke with God and learned of God’s true nature: “The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious” (34:6). The command not to touch the mountain did not seem to apply to him. How strange!

And this is how we discover the incidents of misdirection in Scripture. God commands one thing, yet in practice another happens. He creates a commotion, an obvious command such as “Do not touch the mountain or you will die”. Yet, in practice, if we look quietly and carefully, we can see that it is a barrier of smoke to keep away those “set on mischief”. So they begged Moses that he would not let God anywhere near them. “You speak, but don’t let us hear Him lest we die!” And generations later, at the arrival of Jesus,

they still had not seen through the smokescreen to find their God.

Jesus' explanation

Jesus' ministry was to redress this imbalance and bring Israel back to God. In his own character he would demonstrate the traits of God that they had never understood. In Jesus' parable of the talents he presents to us two types of people:

- 1 the servants who put their master's money to work, and
- 2 the servant who hid it instead.

They represent the two groups at Sinai:

- 1 Moses, who approached to hear God;
- 2 the people, who drew back in fear and refused to hear.

The first group was commended and rewarded, and the second condemned and punished. In the parable Jesus is teaching that the prior understanding the servants have of their master is what decides the drastically different outcomes. Take a look at what the condemned servant raised as his excuse:

"I knew thee that thou art an hard man . . . and I was afraid, and went and hid . . ." (Mt. 25:24,25).

Have you heard that excuse used elsewhere in the Bible at all? "I heard Thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid . . . and I hid myself" (Gen. 3:10).

Yes, Adam used it too. And have you noticed the additional similarities with Sinai? It was the *voice* of God on both occasions (see also v. 8). But hang on. Have you ever thought Adam's statement through? He was naked, OK. So he was ashamed. That's natural. But afraid? What was he afraid of? Was he afraid of nakedness: "I was afraid, because I was naked"? Well, no, because he was not afraid to be naked with his wife, just with God.

Could it be that Adam was afraid of God's voice? Well, yes, because if we look closely at the phrase we shall see that there is nothing else it could possibly mean. He was *afraid of God's voice* condemning him for his nakedness, and, by implication, his sin. God could see it all openly, and so Adam sought to cover it from Him.

Now look at Exodus 19:16-19; 20:19 and Hebrews 12:19 to see how clearly it is presented to us that it was *the voice* they were afraid of at Sinai: ". . . Whose voice then shook the earth" (Heb. 12:26). The question that relates to each of us is, Should Adam have been afraid of that voice if he really knew God? This was the God Who had created all the animals to be Adam's companions, Who

had created him a wife; the God Who had given him the tree of everlasting life; the God Who gave him only one commandment, just the one. Should he have been afraid?

The one talent. Just the one. Should that servant have been afraid?

The wrong idea about God

What is obvious about this servant is that he had entirely the wrong idea about his master. Looking at the echoes of his words in Scripture we saw that Adam and Israel did too. It is a natural reaction, so it seems. But what a dreadful penalty for the misunderstanding in all three cases! Adam was cast out of God's presence; Israel was kept from the Land of Promise; the wicked servant was cast out of the kingdom of his master (who returned as a king). Why such harsh treatment for just a misunderstanding? And could it be that we have the wrong idea of God too? Could we be treated harshly too?

Germination of the seed

All of this may seem academic; but it is not. When we have a misunderstanding of the character of God, believing in the smoke rather than the reality, a seed is sown that grows. It gathers to it other trees until there is a forest. Before we know it we have a whole religion built around the smoke and not the reality. Take Israel, for example: generations of religion were built on the wrong thing. Take the servant in the parable: he spent a lifetime waiting for the master to return, all the while thinking he had done the right thing and would be rewarded. So it matters.

The servant, because he thought his master was a hard man, reaping where he had not sown, did not dare take the chance of losing his master's one talent. He did not believe the man would forgive him. And it was this that paralysed him and stopped him from gaining any interest on his money. He could not invest it because he was afraid to lose it, and in losing it to catch the wrath of a vengeful, mean and spiteful, tight-fisted master. Is God really like that? Is Jesus?

What the parable of the talents teaches us

Jesus' parable teaches us that we can have one of two ways of looking at God. Either we see Him as merciful and will want to work for Him unafraid of the consequences; or we see Him as a hard, unyielding character, and in our fear do no good in His service at all. In this parable we have the pattern of Jesus' teaching in other parables.

When we listen to other parables the rewards we gain will be in direct relation to our preconceived idea of God. In other words, we will only gain the right message from them when we see God as the merciful Master. If we see Him as the vengeful God we will understand Jesus' teaching in entirely the wrong way, not gaining any interest on our understanding, until finally, at the Judgement Seat, we will meet the representative of the One we fear so much, who will take away even the understanding we do have (Mt. 25:28,29).

Worked example: the accused servant

Now it is time to see if this works in practice in another parable: the accused servant in Luke 16. It will be well worth reading this through before continuing further.

Having read it, what do you think the lesson is? Was the servant right to do what he did, taking his master's debtors aside and halving their debt? And would God be pleased with *you* if you did this with what He entrusted to you? Go on, it's your call. What is the lesson here to take away?

The divergent lessons

The lesson Jesus gives at the end of the parable is, "Ye cannot serve God and mammon"; "either [you] will hate the one, and love the other . . .". So who are God and Mammon in the parable?

Notice the details:

The servant had wasted his master's goods and was convicted of his wrong (v. 1). He then set about to save his own skin and halved the debts of his master's debtors just to get in their good books (vv. 4-7). In verses 9-12 the parable ends by saying, "How can God entrust to you the true riches if you are unfaithful in what you do with Mammon [money]?" The lesson is that we must work hard to keep God's commandments so that when Jesus returns he will commend us for it. We must keep what has been entrusted to us, losing none of it. We should take the servant as an example of *what not to do*. We must be diligent never to be accused of wrong, of wasting our Master's goods, lest we be removed from our stewardship.

This is one way of looking at the parable. But what was our presupposition of the master? Naturally, we supposed he cared about his goods. But when Jesus was around, did he exact the full amount from debtors? Did he ever lecture on diligent service? Did he punish anyone or hold them to their sin? Did he weigh up exact measures? Or was our master different . . . ?

Reappraising the parable

Or maybe you saw it in this way instead. The servant had been accused of wasting his master's goods. He knew his master to be a loving and caring man, more interested in the wellbeing of his fellow man than in his own riches. So he set about using those riches to buy a more lasting currency, the currency of love and thankfulness. When the master saw what his servant had done he saw a reflection of himself in his servant. Thus he commended him. He had used his master's goods in a wonderful way to buy lasting friends, relieve the poor, and increase his master's (and his own) standing with his neighbours. We should take the servant *as our example*. The lesson for us is that, if we want to please God and Jesus, we must forgive others. We must not expect from others more than they can give. We must relieve burdens and encourage one another in the gospel of grace. The master clearly cared more about his steward and his debtors than about his goods, and God shows a similar care for His 'debtors'.

The predisposition we bring with us to the Word of God will allow us to take what we are predisposed to take. And it is written in such a way as to allow this to occur. Both parties will go away feeling justified. But when Jesus returns the understanding of one group will be found to be all upside down. If we come to the New Testament with the idea of an angry God, as some portray the God of the Old Testament, we will take away the opposite message to that which we should be taking. Moreover, we will bury the greatest talent we have, that of God's forgiveness and the kindness we show to one another.

(To be continued)

Reading with care

The first and most necessary qualification if you would really make progress in your grasp of Bible teaching is that you learn to read concentrating on the details. Be attentive to note what the words say and not what you suppose that they say or would like them to say.

H. A. Whittaker, *Exploring the Bible*, p. 25.