

knowingly and willingly refuse the promptings of the Spirit. It may be hard to accept that some would indeed do so but, if so, they are really making a conscious decision to reject God which is the real definition of what is called a mortal sin. Such people are really damned by themselves, not by God's refusal to forgive them.

- **'If your faith is that of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain 'move' and it will move'** (Matt.21:21-22)

Jesus is not saying that no-one has sufficient faith to be His follower, just that we all fall short of absolute faith in God. We all have our own foibles and uncertainties, no matter how small, don't we? Or can you move mountains? This is a reminder to be truly humble.

- **'If you wish to be perfect, sell all you have and give it to the poor .. easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven'** (Matt.19)



Here I do not think Jesus is criticising riches themselves, rather the way they can lead people astray from God, especially where people do not use their good fortune to help others. After all, Jesus also commends Zacchaeus the tax collector for giving away only **half** his fortune: **'Today salvation has come to this house'** (Luke ch.19). The dangers of riches are highlighted in the stories of the rich man building bigger barns (Luke ch.12), the rich man and Lazarus (Luke16), and the seed that fell into thorns i.e. those who sought after riches (parable of the Sower, Matt.13). The real fear is that riches can make people feel independent of God, selfish and materialistic. Doesn't that appear true to you, at least based on what you read about the lifestyle and apparent aimlessness of many so-called 'celebrities'?

- **'Unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven'** (Mtt.18:2-3) and **'to such as these the kingdom of Heaven belongs'** (Matt.19:14)

Here Jesus is saying we must become *childlike* not *childish*. But, in what way? By childlike, I think he is referring to the total trust that little children have in their parents, their innocence in the sense of their lack of sin, their simple worries that never become burdens of stress, their basic love of life, their endless hope. Do you agree?



- **'Love your enemies .. whoever takes your cloak, give him your tunic .. do not ask for your property back'** (Luke ch.6)

I think that in these extreme examples Jesus is stressing the importance of charity and a positive attitude of mind towards others who are less than charitable to us. He is asking us to be patient in the face of hostility. He is asking us to show kindness to those whom we may not actually like. He is asking us to be good role models in the face of adversity. He is asking us to be as much like Him as we can be. Impossible? Probably, for most of us anyway. But the effort must be made and we must persevere in our attempts. This is what Jesus is really trying to tell us. If we fail, as we inevitably do from time to time, we must always rise up and try again. An old Zen Buddhist saying makes sense here: **'to fall is not failure, but to fail to rise again is'**.

Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

20. Difficult Sayings of Jesus

How Jesus taught and why he said controversial things



Questions for Reflection

1. Why did Jesus talk in parables?
2. Should everything that Jesus said be understood literally?
3. What did Jesus mean when he said there was a sin that could not be forgiven?
4. Can a poor person get closer to God more easily than a rich one?

Jesus as a Teacher

Jesus' message related to who he was, the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven, and the purpose of his mission. Like any good teacher, Jesus used a variety of methods when teaching, each one chosen to fit a particular audience in particular circumstances:



- **he taught people directly** (e.g. the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. ch.5 to 7)
- **he spoke in parables** (e.g. Matt.13)
- **he asked questions** (e.g. he asked the disciples who people said he was and who they thought he was, Matt. 16)
- **he worked miracles** (to reveal his person, power and authority)
- **he explained things** (e.g. he explains how what goes into a mouth does not make anyone unclean, only what comes out, Matt.15. N.B. the explanations of the parables of the Sower and Darnel in Matt.13 are understood as insertions of the early Church.
- **he showed empathy with people** (e.g. Jesus feels sorrow for the widow of Nain, Luke7; he readily recognises the generosity of the poor widow's offering of two small coins, Luke 21)
- **he was controversial** (e.g. his cures on the Sabbath, as when he cured the man with a withered hand, Matt 12 and his forgiveness of sins, as when he cured the paralytic, Matt.9).
- **he used other sources and examples** (e.g. when the Pharisees criticised his disciples for picking corn on the Sabbath he referred to how David ate the loaves of offering to Yahweh, Matt.12; he quotes Isaiah 29:13 against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, Matt.15).
- **he used the force of his own personality** (e.g. when he turned over the tables of the dealers in the Temple, Matthew 21)
- **he used normal objects and nature** (e.g. he referred to 'the birds of the air', Matt.6, the cloth and wineskins ch.9, and fig tree, ch.21).



Jesus' Use of Parables

Parables are stories that use similes or metaphors in the context of imagery that is known to, and understood by, the audience. Parables are, therefore, a very useful tool for passing on a message as they arouse the interest of the listener and provoke thought at the same time. Please note that some stories like the True Vine (John 15) and the Good Shepherd (John 10) are really allegories, that is, each element of the story actually symbolises something or someone (in the given stories, they are referring to Jesus and the Church).

However, a major difficulty presents itself because it appears that Jesus used parables to keep the meanings of his teachings obscure (Matt. 13:11):

'to you is granted to understand the mysteries of the Kingdom, but to them is not granted'

Jesus quotes Isaiah ch.6 to justify his strategy:

'listen but never understand, look and look but never perceive'

Can this be a correct understanding of these passages? I am not sure. Many scholars think that the original Aramaic could easily have been mistranslated into Greek, and could simply refer to Jesus **knowing** that whatever he said would not be believed, not that he wished to deceive. After all, Jesus is used to the Jewish hierarchy questioning his methods (e.g. Matthew 11:19, where Jesus is fed up being criticised for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners) and felt frustrated at the Jews not recognising who he was (John 8). I think there is some merit in this view particularly as, later, the Gospel author (quoting Psalm 78) gave another reason for why Jesus spoke in parables:

'I will speak in parables, to unfold what has been hidden ..' (Matthew 13:35)

Jesus only explains the parables to those who accepted Him (Mtt.13:51-52); those who did not accept him had 'hardened' their own hearts against Him.

Difficult Sayings of Jesus

Several sayings of Jesus have a very harsh ring to them and the question has to be asked, 'Were they intended to be taken literally?' This is especially important when, from what has already been stated, it is clear that Jesus used many different techniques to preach his message. Jesus was clearly a marvellous orator. Was part of his technique to use hyperbole to add emphasis to his teaching? I think that this is probably the case.

- **'Do not worry about what to eat .. or wear'** (Matt.6:25f)

Jesus emphasised the need to trust in God in dramatic language. Yet surely we all have to work, care for our family and be prudent about our bills? Yes we do, but Jesus is not saying we can be reckless, just that we must not be *overly* worried about what the future holds and, instead, trust in God and make Him our priority: **'seek first the kingdom of God'**. There is also, I think, an implication about the danger of wanting more and better things, and making these a priority: **'It is the Gentiles who set their hearts on these things'**.

- **'Follow me and let the dead bury the dead'** (Matt.8:22)

Jesus does not literally mean not to bury the dead. He is using extreme language to make a theological point. He makes this point again in a slightly less but still contentious way when he states: **'no-one who prefers father or mother to me is worthy of me'** (Matt.10).

- **'I have not come to bring peace but the sword'** (Matt.10)
'I have come to bring fire to the earth .. division' (Luke 12)

In these frightening words Jesus is again asking us to make a choice between God and family. But this time he is recognising that sometimes our spiritual decisions can cause conflict and dissension within a family and between friends. Sometimes we must be brave enough to stand up for what we believe in, even if it means being hated by others in the process: **'brother will betray brother .. you will be universally hated .. whoever stands firm to the end will be saved'** (Matthew 10).



- **'If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out'** (Matt.5:29)
'Every human sin will be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven' (Matt.12:32)

In the first quotation, Jesus is not giving an instruction that is meant to be taken literally. If he was the world would be full of blind people! No, again he is using hyperbole to illustrate the repellent nature of sin to God. In the second quotation, I think Jesus is referring to those who