

# **THE PARABLES OF JESUS**

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**Grades 9-12  
Year 1  
Quarter 4**



# **DEFINITION AND PURPOSE OF PARABLES**

## **Lesson Aim**

To teach students what a parable is, enable them to understand why Jesus used them, and give them basic tools needed for the interpretation of parables.

## **Memory Verse**

**Matthew 13:10** - “The disciples came to him and asked, ‘Why do you speak to the people in parables?’”

## **Lesson Background**

As we enter a new quarter, we embark upon a study of a group of stories that have been the source both of great insight and great confusion and abuse since the time they were spoken by Jesus. The parable is a literary form unique to Jesus. He was the first to use it, though many have used it since. This week we will concentrate on the genre itself, looking at the definition, purpose, and interpretation of parables. The reason it is important to examine these things is because the parables of Jesus have been subjected to great abuse over the years in the area of interpretation, and most of these abuses have resulted from trying to read into the parables things that were never intended to be there in the first place. Students thus will be in a better position to understand Jesus’ parables if they know what to look for and how to use it.

In addition, the application of these parables will be greatly enhanced if students understand their purpose. Jesus never intended parables to teach unbelievers, but rather to confound them. Unbelievers in the class should understand from the very beginning that the studies this quarter will be as foreign to them as they were to many of Jesus’ listeners.

## Lesson Procedure

### 1. What is a Parable?

Begin the class by asking your students to define a parable. It should take very little time for someone to come up with the standard definition - "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." Continue to probe at this point, drawing out distinctive characteristics of parables and noting how they differ from similar literary forms such as allegories and fables. The following should be brought out during the discussion:

- A parable is an earthly story. It is drawn from the common experience of Jesus' listeners. Every parable Jesus told described a situation familiar to his readers. It should be noted in passing that knowledge of first-century Jewish culture is thus essential for a proper understanding of the parables. What was commonplace to Jesus' listeners is often foreign to us.
- A parable is a piece of fiction. Though any of the parables could have happened, it is erroneous to assume that any parable was based on an actual incident (the existence today of an inn called The Inn of the Good Samaritan on the Jerusalem-Jericho road, for instance, is a patent absurdity).
- A parable is intended to convey spiritual truth in a symbolic way, but differs from other symbolic forms of literature. Unlike a fable (e.g., Judges 9:7-21; Aesop's fables), a parable is a story that actually could have taken place; unlike an allegory (e.g., Ezekiel 16; *Pilgrim's Progress*), a parable is intended to convey a single truth. It is a mistake to assign symbolic significance to every detail of a parable *unless Jesus indicated that such was His intent*. This is perhaps the greatest error made in the interpretation of the parables of Jesus.

A parable is thus an extended metaphor, a word picture in the form of a story. It is the discovery of the single truth Jesus is seeking to communicate that is the goal of the interpretive process.

### 2. Why Did Jesus Speak in Parables?

This was the same question asked by the disciples in Matthew 13:10. We will now examine the answer given by Jesus in Matthew 13:11-17.

Though many of the parables are familiar to us through repeated exposure, they clearly were not understood by most of those who heard them, including the disciples. The question then arises, that if Jesus was trying to communicate spiritual truth, why didn't He simply spell it out instead of clothing it in symbolic language?

Have your students answer the question on the basis of Matthew 13:11-17. They should arrive at the conclusion that the parables deliberately obscured spiritual truth. Jesus' ministry was one of division. The parables, like His ministry as a whole, gave light to those who came in faith and increased the confusion and condemnation of those who did not. It is only to those "to whom it is given" that the parables convey truth. Even then, of course, comprehension was neither immediate nor perfect. In Matthew 13, Jesus explained His parables only to the disciples - but He did need to explain them. In some cases, comprehension did not come until after Jesus' death, with the coming of the Holy Spirit. Students should thus realize that much can be gained from the study of parables, but that the study is likely to seem nonsensical to those who are unbelievers.

### **3. How Should Parables Be Interpreted?**

The following principles should be kept in mind when interpreting parables. Some derive from what we've already discussed and some from common sense.

- When interpreting a parable, one central meaning should be sought. Drawing conclusions from the parable that go beyond this central meaning is dangerous, and is the major cause of fanciful and speculative interpretations.
- The story told in the parable must be understood in order for its meaning to be understood. This underscores the importance of knowing something about the culture in which Jesus' original listeners lived.
- The parables must be interpreted in context. The surrounding verses usually give clues to the meaning, whether through a preceding discussion of the situation that prompted the parable or through a following explanation.
- Do not be deceived by the formulaic introduction. "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." Many erroneously assume that the first thing mentioned in the parable is then intended to represent the Kingdom. Actually, it is the central meaning of the parable that is intended to convey information about the Kingdom.

### **Conclusion**

Students will probably need to be reminded of these principles frequently as the course progresses. Tell them to read all of Matthew 13 in preparation for next week and try to apply these principles to the interpretation of the parables found there.



## **FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT**

## **DEFINITION AND PURPOSE OF PARABLES**

1. What is a parable? How does it differ from a fable? an allegory?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Why did Jesus tell parables? Why do you think He would want to conceal spiritual truth from anyone?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Read Matthew 13 and think about the parables there in the light of what you learned this week.





# **PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM - THE SOWER**

**Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

## **Lesson Aim**

To describe the four types of soils and challenge students to identify their own spiritual status in terms of the soils.

## **Memory Verse**

**Matthew 13:11** - “He replied, ‘The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.’”

## **Lesson Background**

We have already taken note of the difficulty associated with the interpretation of parables. As we spend the next twelve weeks looking at most of the parables of Jesus, we will see a great variety of interpretations. But no parable has suffered more from the vagaries of interpreters than the one to be considered this week.

The range of interpretation is made even more strange by the fact that Jesus Himself explains the parable, thus fixing the basic outlines of its meaning and identifying all the major symbols. The variety of interpretation exists, then, not because of symbolism, but because interpreters differ on the number of soils that are thought to represent true Christians. I personally have heard sermons in which one, two, three and even all four soils were spoken of as representing true believers.

This diversity must be considered a serious matter because of the fatal presumption it can engender. Students (or adults) who have been led to believe that fruitless plants are part of God’s Kingdom are being

confirmed in their hypocrisy. Thus it is vital that the teacher communicate to the students in the strongest possible terms the lost condition of those described as rocky and thorny soils. It is also essential that application not be neglected - students must be challenged to evaluate seriously the “soil composition” of their own hearts.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by handing out a copy of the sheet titled “Symbolism in the Parable of the Sower” to each of your students. Have each student fill in the chart individually. They should list such symbols as: farmer\*, seed, path, birds, rocky soil, sun, thorns, good soil, harvest\* (only the symbols indicated by an asterisk are not specifically identified by Jesus). Then have the students compare lists. For obvious reasons, they should be virtually identical. Having established the basic symbolism, it is now time to go over the parable in detail.

### **1. The General Setting (verses 1-3)**

Jesus was sitting in a boat near the shore of the Sea of Galilee, just outside Capernaum, speaking to a large crowd on the shore that included His disciples. The Sea of Galilee is surrounded by hills, and it is possible that Jesus’ listeners could have seen farmers on the hillsides doing exactly what Jesus was describing. Seeds were carried in a shoulder bag and scattered by hand as the farmer traversed his field. The seed, as verses 19, 20, 22, and 23 make clear, is intended to symbolize the Word of God. But whom does the farmer represent? He is the one who speaks the Word, whether it be Christ Himself or His messengers.

### **2. The Path (verses 4, 19)**

Fields belonging to different farmers were separated from one another by footpaths, on which the soil would be tightly packed by the constant passage of travelers on foot. Seed tossed onto the path could not penetrate the soil and would quickly be gobbled up by hungry birds. Ask your students to describe the kind of person symbolized by the path. He would not necessarily be a notorious sinner, but one impervious to the Word. In fact, Jesus found that the notorious sinners of His day responded to the Word, while the religious leaders displayed the kind of impenetrable hardness characteristic of this soil. Pathway people can be very nice, even religious - but the Word of God goes in one ear and out the other (or perhaps, to use another cliché, slides off them like water off a duck’s back). These people care nothing for spiritual things. Are any of your students like this?

### **3. The Rocky Soil (verses 5-6, 20-21)**

Much of the region around the Sea of Galilee consists of a thin layer of topsoil spread atop a limestone shelf. Seeds that fall into such soil tend to sprout rapidly, since the shallow soil stays warmer and contains more moisture than deeper soil during the early part of the growing season. When summer arrives, however, the heat of the sun quickly dries out the shallow soil, and the roots of the plants are unable to penetrate the rock to reach water. As a result, the plant quickly dies.

Again solicit from your students descriptions of the person represented by this soil. The rapid early growth suggests a strong emotional response to the Gospel. The stifling sun is the heat of persecution or trial, which, like the storm of Matthew 7:24-27, distinguishes between legitimate and fraudulent conversions. This soil clearly illustrates the danger inherent in decisionism. Assurance of salvation cannot be based on

an initial emotional experience, but only on the clear evidence of fruit in a person's life. Emphasize to your students that response to trial and persecution can be significant indicators of a person's spiritual condition.

#### **4. The Thorny Soil (verses 7, 22)**

Palestinian farmers typically plowed the seed under after sowing it. Some weed seeds would survive the plow, however, and would spring up and rob the young plants of sun, moisture, and nutrients from the soil. Though the plants might not die, they would be too badly stunted to produce fruit.

Your students may be tempted to conclude that the thorny soil represents a "worldly Christian," one who is "carnal," who has received Christ but is not living for Him. Yet passages such as Matthew 7:15-20 and John 15:1-8 indicate that one who does not bear fruit is not a Christian. If it is true that "you cannot serve two masters," one whose spiritual commitment is stifled by the concerns of this world has no basis for claiming that he belongs to Christ.

It should be noted as well that thorns need not be cultivated in order to grow. All that is required is benign neglect. In fact, in the same way that hard work is needed to prevent the growth of weeds in a garden, diligence is required to keep worldliness from choking a person's spirituality.

#### **5. The Fertile Soil (verses 8, 23)**

The last type of soil is the fertile soil, which produces a bountiful crop. What does the fruit represent? Your students will probably suggest ideas such as good works or converts. The best answer comes from Galatians 5:22-23. It is the fruit of the Spirit that distinguishes believers from unbelievers. This fruit cannot be produced apart from the Spirit, and always flows from His presence in a person's life.

#### **6. Why Jesus Told the Parable**

For the multitude, Jesus was driving them to examine their own condition. Many were following Him out of shallow or false motives. As we saw last week, many in the crowd could not be expected to understand the parable at all. At this point, encourage your students, who have had the parable explained to them, to make an honest assessment of the soil they most closely resemble. What must they then do?

For His disciples, Jesus was preparing them for the variety of responses they could expect from those to whom they were to minister. In what ways is this parable an encouragement to those who seek to spread the Gospel?



## SYMBOLISM IN THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

SYMBOLS USED IN THE PARABLE	VERSES WHERE SYMBOLS ARE FOUND	MEANING GIVEN BY JESUS	VERSES WHERE MEANING IS FOUND	SUGGESTED MEANINGS FOR UN- IDENTIFIED SYMBOLS



**FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT**

**PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM - THE SOWER**

Fill in the following chart based on the Parable of the Sower, then try to think of people you know who could be like the four soils. Into which category do you fit? If it is one of the first three, what do you need to do about it?

SOIL	CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS TYPE OF PERSON	PERSON IN SCRIPTURE WHO FITS THIS CATEGORY
PATHWAY		
ROCKS		
THORNS		
FERTILE SOIL		





# **THE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM**

## **Matthew 13:24-50**

### **Lesson Aim**

To communicate to students the nature of the Kingdom of God and help them discern their relationship to it.

### **Memory Verse**

**Matthew 13:12** - “Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”

### **Lesson Background**

Last week we looked at the Parable of the Sower, where Jesus categorized different responses to the Gospel. In the remainder of Matthew 13, Jesus continues to present parables that are intended to communicate the nature of that kingdom of which He is the King.

The key concept associated with the Kingdom of God is the spread of God’s authority in the world. Not all acknowledge that authority, of course, but it exists nonetheless. The six remaining parables can be divided into three pairs. The parables of the Wheat and the Weeds (verses 24-30, 36-43) and the Net (verses 47-50) clarify the distinction between those who recognize the Lordship of Christ and those who do not. These “sandwich” the other two pairs and serve as reminders of the lesson of the Sower - not all will respond, and not all who respond will respond truly - and an encouragement that judgment will separate the true from the false. The second pair, the Mustard Seed and the Yeast, speak of the growth of the Kingdom in its various aspects. The third pair, the Treasure and the Pearl, speak of the inestimable value of the Kingdom and the urgency of submission to it. As we will see in going through the lesson, the members of each pair

complement one another, approaching their basic thrust from slightly different perspectives. Pray that your students “have ears to hear.”

## Lesson Procedure

Begin the class by dividing your students into three groups. Give each group 10-15 minutes to make up a parable. Remind them that a parable is a common, everyday occurrence told in such a way as to illustrate a single point. Assign to each group one of the following three points to illustrate in a parable:

**Group #1** - God will one day separate His people from those who do not belong to Him.

**Group #2** - The Kingdom of God grows from insignificant beginnings to fill the entire earth.

**Group #3** - The Kingdom of God is so valuable that it is worth giving up everything to obtain it.

Before turning the groups loose to do their work, talk for a few minutes about the concept of the Kingdom of God. [NOTE: The phrase “Kingdom of Heaven” is a circumlocution, used by Matthew because of the Jewish aversion to the use of the name of God.] The Kingdom is not a place, nor is it exclusively future (though its fullest manifestation is in the future). The Kingdom is God’s rule, the exercise of His authority. God is the sovereign King, but His Kingdom spreads as His authority is acknowledged.

After the groups have done their work, bring them back together.

### 1. The Distinction of God’s Kingdom (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50)

Have the first group relate their parable. Then go over Jesus’ parables of the Wheat and the Weeds and the Net. The following explanatory notes may be helpful.

**Verse 25** - The weeds or tares (KJV) sown by the enemy were darnel, a poisonous plant that looks like wheat until the fruit (grain) begins to appear.

**Verse 30** - The order here is not intended to have detailed eschatological significance. It is simply part of the story Jesus told to make His point.

**Verse 36** - Note that, like the parable of the Sower, the explanation is given only to the disciples.

The main point of the two parables should be obvious - at the end of the age, the righteous and the wicked will be separated. Ask your students in what way the two parables approach the basic theme differently. If they can’t pick it up, point out to them that the second parable concentrates on the future judgment, while the first focuses on the present situation. What is the significance of the command not to separate the wheat and weeds now? Several things should be noted:

- The separation that is forbidden is in the world, not in the church. This parable cannot be used as an argument against church discipline.
- It does argue against monasticism, or the possibility of constructing a “Christian society.” The weeds are with us until the end.

- The only way to distinguish between wheat and weeds is by the fruit produced. Of course, we saw the same point last week.

## **2. The Growth of God’s Kingdom (verses 31-33)**

Have the second group report, then discuss these two little parables. Both picture growth from small beginnings, but differences exist. Note the following points:

- The first parable pictures growth in terms of getting larger, the second in terms of spreading out. The Kingdom is to grow both numerically and geographically.
- In the Mustard Seed parable, interpreters often get hung up trying to explain the birds, especially since birds symbolized Satan in the Sower. It should be noted that symbols need not always stand for the same thing (in the parable of the Sower, the seed was the Word of God; in the Wheat and the Weeds, the seed represented people). Rather than trying to make the birds stand for something, it is better to see them simply as indicating the size to which the plant had grown.
- In the parable of the Yeast, the problem again stems from a desire to give a symbol a uniform interpretation. Yeast clearly symbolizes evil in certain contexts (Matthew 16:6; I Corinthians 5:8), and some commentators accordingly see this parable as picturing the corruption of the church. It is far more satisfactory to see the permeating quality of yeast as its overriding symbolic characteristic, and thus interpret the parable as picturing the gradual filling of the world with the Kingdom of God.

## **3. The Value of God’s Kingdom (verses 44-46)**

The third group now takes its turn, followed by a discussion of this last parable pair. They both clearly indicate that the Kingdom of God is so valuable that it is worth giving up everything else in order to possess it. How do the parables differ? Largely in that the first parable pictures a man finding a valuable treasure by accident, while the second shows the culmination of a long search. God brings people into His Kingdom through sudden discoveries as well as through long searches. No matter how a person discovers the Kingdom, though, one who has truly found it realizes that it is of infinite value.

## **Conclusion**

The following applications should be made before finishing the lesson.

- Christians are to be “in the world but not of the world.” Believers cannot escape a weedy environment, but their fruit should make them distinguishable.
- There will be a final and ultimate separation of wheat and weeds, good and bad fish.
- God’s Kingdom will grow and prosper. Satan cannot prevent the work of God from succeeding.
- Whatever you may think to be important, it cannot compare with the value of the Kingdom of God.



**FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT**

**THE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM**

Fill in the following chart:

PARABLE	VERSES IN MATTHEW 13	MAIN POINT OF PAIR	DIFFERENT EMPHASES OF PARABLES IN PAIR	KEY APPLICATION OF PAIR
THE WHEAT AND THE WEEDS				
THE NET				
THE MUSTARD SEED				
THE YEAST				
THE TREASURE				
THE PEARL				



# **PARABLES OF THE LOST**

## **Luke 15**

### **Lesson Aim**

To impress upon the students God's love for sinners and His willingness to forgive those who repent.

### **Memory Verse**

**Matthew 13:13** - "This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.'"

### **Lesson Background**

The most important piece of background information associated with these parables involves the people to whom they are addressed. Jesus had been speaking to a group of "tax collectors and sinners" ("sinners" was a term used by the Pharisees to describe those who were less than fastidious about observing the ceremonial law and the traditions appended to it by the religious leaders). The Pharisees and scribes, always ready with a word of criticism, began complaining about Jesus' association with such low-life scum. Jesus then responds with three parables. The parables are spoken, not to the crowd, but to the religious leaders. Their basic thrust, consequently, is not to encourage the lost, though the parables certainly can accomplish that, but to display God's love for sinners in contrast to the hypocritical venality of the Pharisees. The application to your class is therefore twofold: Primarily, the parables should challenge the Christians in your class to love sinners as Christ does. Secondly, unbelievers may be both confronted with their self-righteousness and encouraged with the open arms of a loving and forgiving God.

## **Lesson Procedure**

The first two verses of Luke 15 introduce us to three people or groups of people: Jesus, the “tax collectors and sinners,” and the Pharisees and scribes. Have the members of the class begin by reading individually through the chapter, then filling in the accompanying chart. On the basis of what they have written down, proceed to discuss the three parables. Be sure to leave at least half of your class time for the parable of the Prodigal Son.

### **1. The Lost Sheep (verses 3-7)**

#### **A. What it teaches about God**

God is here pictured as a shepherd who seeks stray sheep. He does not wait for sinners to come to Him, but seeks them out and lovingly carries them home. He does not scold the foolish sheep or grudgingly put Himself out to find them, but rejoices at bringing even one into the fold.

#### **B. What it teaches about sinners**

The sheep may or may not be aware of its lostness, but its poor sense of direction renders it incapable of finding its way home. The sheep cannot save itself, but is totally dependent on the shepherd for its rescue.

#### **C. What it teaches about Pharisees**

Verse 7 is surely a dig at the self-righteous Pharisees. There is, of course, no one save Christ Himself who needs no repentance, but the Pharisees thought themselves to be without sin. I’m sure they loved being told that one repentant prostitute caused more joy in heaven than ninety-nine Pharisees!

### **2. The Lost Coin (verses 8-10)**

This parable is much the same as the first in its basic teaching. God again places great value on the sinner. (The reason for this value has been debated. Some have suggested that the pieces of silver were worn as a necklace by a bride, and, like a wedding ring today, had great sentimental value. Others have maintained that, for a poor woman, the loss of a drachma, a full day’s wage, was an economic disaster of the highest order. Whatever the reason, the coin was worth a great deal to the one who lost it.) Also, we should note that, if the sheep was unable to remedy its lost condition, the coin was unable even to be aware of its lost condition. God can save even those who are insensitive to their plight.

### **3. The Lost Son (verses 11-32)**

The parable of the Prodigal Son (“prodigal” means “wasteful”) is one of Jesus’ most familiar stories. The three main characters clearly fit the categories we have been considering - the father represents God, the younger son is the sinner, while the elder son clearly is intended to symbolize the Pharisees.

#### **A. What it teaches about God**

The following points should be noted:



- Verse 12 - God suffers the insolence of sinners, not squelching rebellion though He has the power to do so.
- Verse 20 - God is grieved by sin and welcomes with open arms those who repent.
- Verses 22-24 - God grants the status of full sonship to repentant sinners.
- Verse 28 - God even condescends to entreat the scornful hypocrite who has presumed to challenge His wisdom.

## **B. What it teaches about sinners**

- Verse 12 - Sinners spit in the face of God in their rebellion. Can you imagine going to your father and saying, “Pop, I can’t hang around forever and wait for you to die. I want my inheritance now!” [NOTE: By the law of primogeniture, the oldest son received a double portion of the inheritance (his “birthright” - cf. Genesis 25:29-34); thus in a family with two sons, the younger son would get 1/3 of the estate.]
- Verse 13 - Sinners can’t wait to get out from under God’s authority. They chafe under it like a juvenile delinquent. Sinners take no thought for the future. The younger son wasted his money as if there were no tomorrow. Sinners live as if this life were the sum total of human existence.
- Verses 14-16 - Sin eventually brings about its consequences, both in this life and the next. Only a fool thinks he can escape them. Imagine the shame of a Jewish boy, reduced to feeding pigs and envying their slops! Note too that, in the final analysis, a sinner is alone with the consequences of his sin. There is no one to share his agony or to deliver him from it.
- Verses 17-20a - The essence of repentance - sorrow, humility, turning from sin. Note that the first two would have been worthless had he not left the far country.
- Verse 21 - The sinner is overwhelmed by the love of God. He never gets the chance to finish his little memorized speech (cf. verses 18-19).
- Verse 24 - Salvation is passing from death into life.

## **C. What it teaches about Pharisees**

- Verses 25-26 - The Pharisees immediately got suspicious when they heard anyone having a good time. Remember, they accused Jesus of being a drunkard!
- Verse 28 - Anger at the grace of God implies presumption of deserving on their own part. They hated to see anyone else blessed because they thought they had earned it while others had not.
- Verse 29 - Hypocrites serve God out of selfish motives, not out of love.
- Verse 30 - He actually seemed jealous about the harlots. To a Pharisee, refraining from sin is a terrible, painful, but meritorious sacrifice.

## **Conclusion**

Conclude the lesson with the applications suggested at the end of the Lesson Background section.

## PARABLES OF THE LOST

PARABLE	WHAT DOES THE PARABLE TELL US ABOUT . . .		
	GOD	“SINNERS”	PHARISEES
THE LOST SHEEP (V. 3-7)			
THE LOST COIN (V. 8-10)			
THE LOST SON (V. 11-32)			



**FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT**

**PARABLES OF  
THE LOST**

1. What do the three parables of Luke 15 have in common? How do they differ in their approach to their common thrust?
2. Write in a single paragraph what Jesus might have said to the scribes and Pharisees had He answered them directly rather than telling parables.
3. Fit yourself into the three parables of Luke 15. In each case, which part of the parable describes your spiritual condition? What do these parables teach you about yourself? What should they motivate you to do?



# **PARABLES OF FORGIVENESS**

**Luke 7:36-50; Matthew 18:21-35**

## **Lesson Aim**

To teach students to be grateful for God's forgiveness if they have received it and motivate them to forgive others on the basis of God's mercy toward them.

## **Memory Verse**

**Matthew 13:14** - "In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.'"

## **Lesson Background**

Both of today's parables deal with the subject of forgiveness. In some ways they are very different, and in other ways much the same. One was told to a Pharisee, the other to Jesus' disciples. One responded to a failure to love God, the other to a failure to forgive others - but both of these failures were rooted in a lack of appreciation for God's forgiveness, which in turn derives from an inadequate perception of one's own sinfulness.

Ultimately, then, the success of this lesson hinges on the degree to which the students are able to come to grips with the depth of their own sin. One who fails to fathom his own sinfulness will have neither appreciation for the forgiveness of God nor compassion for the sins of others. The connection between these two is seen in that Simon the Pharisee and Peter, both of whom lacked compassion for others (Simon for the woman, Peter for the one who repeatedly sinned against him), were both accused by Jesus of failure to love God and appreciate His forgiveness. You must impress upon your students today that refusal to forgive others is a slap in the face of God, an act of crass ingratitude.

## Lesson Procedure

Begin the class by asking your students which they think is harder, to forgive someone or to ask for forgiveness. They will probably agree that it is harder to ask for forgiveness, because that requires humbling oneself in front of another person and admitting wrongdoing. Granting forgiveness is also difficult for some, since it requires voluntarily giving up an “edge” that many use to feel superior to others. Jesus relates giving and receiving forgiveness to each other in the two parables we will consider today.

### 1. The Creditor and Two Debtors (Luke 7:36-50)

#### A. The Context (verses 36-39)

Jesus had been invited to the home of Simon the Pharisee for dinner. It was still early in Jesus’ ministry, and the Pharisees, though not yet hostile, were beginning to get curious. The dinner must have been at least semi-public since the woman simply walked in off the street. When she is referred to as a “sinner,” the term is being used in the same way as in Luke 15, which we considered last week - to describe one who was lax in adhering to the ceremonial laws and traditions. We should not necessarily imply from this description any notorious immorality.

She was able to stand at Jesus’ feet because in the first century people reclined on cushions or low couches while eating. The Pharisee’s suspicions were natural enough, since physical contact with such a woman would render one ceremonially unclean, and thus unfit to partake of a meal apart from some purification rite.

#### B. The Parable (verses 40-42a)

The story is a very simple one. A man had two debtors, one of whom owed him 500 denarii and the other 50 [NOTE: a denarius is one day’s wage]. He forgave both debts. Jesus then asked the rather obvious question, “Which man would be more grateful?”

#### C. The Application (verses 42b-50)

Simon responded to Jesus’ question with the obvious answer - the one who had been relieved of the larger debt would be more grateful. Jesus then “lets the other shoe drop,” so to speak. He points out the clear signs of gratitude and devotion visible in the woman’s behavior, and contrasts this with Simon’s own lack of common courtesy (washing the feet, anointing the head, and greeting with a kiss were acts associated with proper hospitality).

At this point present your students with a question. If, as Jesus’ parable indicated, one who required little forgiveness felt little gratitude, while one who had much to be forgiven loved much as a result, may we then conclude that the woman needed much forgiveness, while Simon needed little? Hopefully, your students will be able to discern the fallacy in this reasoning. All are sinners, and as such require a great deal of forgiveness. Simon’s lack of love did not show that he needed little forgiveness, but rather that he thought he needed little forgiveness.

In bringing this application to bear on your students, help them to see that those who show and feel little love for God have never really come to grips with their sin. Whether these students profess to be believers or not, such an attitude is the height of presumption.



One further thing should be noted. A person could easily draw the conclusion from verse 47 that the woman was forgiven because of her loving deeds, but verse 50 clearly indicates that she was saved by faith. Love for God is the result of forgiveness, not its cause.

## **2. The Ungrateful Servant (Matthew 18:21-35)**

### **A. The Context (verses 15-22)**

Jesus had just been talking about church discipline, and one of the key thrusts of the disciplinary procedure outlined by Jesus is restoration. If the sinner is to be restored, there must be forgiveness, both by God and man. But Peter approaches Jesus with what he perceives as a flaw in the system, namely, the possibility of repentance that is less than sincere. Peter imagines a situation in which a person goes through cycles of sin and repentance in which no serious effort seems to be made to change. How long, he asks, do we put up with this behavior before we throw the bum out? In suggesting a limit of seven times, Peter thought himself generous - the rabbinical teaching of the day required forgiveness only three times. Jesus' response must be seen as a bit of hyperbole - anyone who would count up 490 incidents of forgiveness, then refuse to forgive the 491<sup>st</sup> time, has a problem with holding grudges, among other things. Jesus is essentially saying that whenever a man repents, we should forgive.

### **B. The Parable (verses 23-34)**

Jesus again illustrates His point with a parable. A king was auditing his books and found that one of his servants owed him 10,000 talents. A talent was a unit of weight, and when referring to money could be either gold or silver. In terms of spending power, a talent of gold was an enormous fortune - twenty years' wages for a common laborer. This man had, through some undoubtedly creative means, managed to pile up a debt that would take him a mere 200,000 *years* to work off!

The king took the only recourse available to him - he in effect repossessed the man and his family, in order to get some minimal compensation for his loss. The absurd pleas of the doomed servant moved the king, however, and he canceled the debt. Can you imagine such incredible mercy?

The servant then seized one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 denarii (about four months' wages) and had him thrown into debtors' prison. When news got back to the king about this servant's base ingratitude, he quickly was thrown into prison for the rest of his days.

### **C. The Application (verse 35)**

The parable obviously refers to God as the king and His people as the servants. Every child of God has been forgiven an incalculable fortune. As a result, it would represent the depth of ingratitude to balk at forgiving a fellow servant, no matter how irritating or inconsistent his behavior.

## **Conclusion**

Several points should be noted. First of all, Jesus specifically states that forgiveness must be from the heart. The grudging mumbling of a few words of conciliation is not true forgiveness. Secondly, the chief barrier to wholehearted forgiveness of others is the failure to appreciate how much God has forgiven you. Thus the application here is similar to what we saw in the first parable. One who does not realize the depth

of his own sin is incapable of loving either God or man rightly. It is upon this love that true forgiveness is based.

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## PARABLES OF FORGIVENESS

1. Why do you find it hard to ask for forgiveness? Why do you find it hard to forgive others?
2. In what ways are the messages of the parables in Luke 7:36-50 and Matthew 18:21-35 similar? In what ways do they complement one another?
3. What is the relationship between God's forgiveness of our sins, our love for God, and our forgiveness of other people?
4. Why is it true that one who does not think of himself as a sinner will have trouble loving God and forgiving other people?



# **PARABLES OF STEWARDSHIP**

**Luke 12:42-48; 16:1-13; 17:7-10; 19:11-27; 20:9-19**

## **Lesson Aim**

To impress upon the students that all we have comes from God, and that all men are accountable before God for how they use what He has given.

## **Memory Verse**

**Matthew 13:15** - "For this people's heart has become calloused: they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn, and I would heal them."

## **Lesson Background**

Today's lesson deals with stewardship. A steward was a servant with a large measure of responsibility. He oversaw the other servants, handled his master's financial affairs, and generally ran the estate. As Paul tells us, the most important quality in a steward is faithfulness (I Corinthians 4:2).

Jesus utilizes the stewardship concept in many ways. In the five parables to be considered today, we will see it applied to people in general, to Christians, and to religious leaders. This variety underscores the two main areas of application to be brought out today (in addition to the specific applications for each parable). The first is that, since everyone has in some way been the recipient of the grace of God, everyone is accountable to God for their lives. The second is that greater privilege brings with it greater responsibility, and a correspondingly greater judgment for unfaithfulness. These major applications will allow you as a teacher to challenge each member of your class, believer and unbeliever alike, with his or her responsibilities before God.

## Lesson Procedure

Begin class by handing each of your students a stack of play money (money from Monopoly or some similar board game will do nicely). Explain to your students that you are not giving them this money, but rather asking them to take care of it for you. They may use it any way they please, but they must report to you their use of the funds and give back at the end of the designated time any return the money has produced.

Next turn to a discussion of this hypothetical situation. How does the money in this case differ from an outright gift? The students should be able to see that it has strings attached - they are accountable to you for how they use it. Tell them then that this situation illustrates spiritual truth on three levels, and ask them to fill in the gaps. How does it illustrate God's dealings with mankind at large? What stewardship has He given to the human race? The obvious answer here is that He has given the earth and its resources. He provides food, clothing, and shelter for the just and the unjust alike. What about Christians? To them He has entrusted spiritual gifts for serving in the Body of Christ. On an even higher level, to spiritual leaders He has entrusted His people and the accompanying responsibility for faithful oversight. The parables to be considered today deal with stewardship on these three levels.

### 1. The Human Race as Stewards (Luke 12:42-48)

#### A. The Context (verses 35-41)

Jesus has just been warning His disciples about the importance of readiness with regard to His Second Coming. Peter then inquires if the warning is intended for everyone, or only the disciples. Jesus' expansion of the servant image (and after all, what is a parable if not an extended word picture) indicates that His warning has relevance for everyone.

#### B. The Parable (verses 42-48)

##### i. The Responsibility of the Steward (verses 42-46)

Jesus speaks here of the steward, who supervises the other servants. The one who serves responsibly will receive greater responsibility, while the one who acts selfishly and abuses others is destroyed.

##### ii. The Responsibility of the Servants (verses 47-48)

Among the servants, disobedience is punished, whether deliberate or in ignorance, though those who disobey out of ignorance receive less severe punishment.

#### C. The Application

If we assume that the steward is to represent leaders in the church, we may conclude that there will be leaders in the church who, like the thieves of John 10, try to fleece the sheep rather than feeding them. Since none of your students is in this position, however, it should only be noted in passing that God will judge those who use His church for self-aggrandizement and abuse of power.

The main application for your students comes in the second part of the parable, where sins of ignorance are punished to a lesser degree than deliberate disobedience. Ask your students to discuss the following questions:

- Does this passage teach that those who have never heard the Gospel are still subject to God's judgment?
- Does this passage teach that those who have heard the Gospel and have refused to bow to God's authority receive as a result more severe punishment?
- Does this then imply that everyone is accountable to God? In what sense?

## **2. Christians As Stewards (Luke 16:1-13; 17:7-10; 19:11-27)**

### **A. The Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1-13)**

#### **i. The Parable (verses 1-8)**

This is an interesting and difficult parable that must be understood in light of the contemporary practice. Old Testament law prohibited lending money at interest to other Jews. But the practice was common in New Testament times, though disguised in the following way: When a man lent money to another, he translated it into some marketable commodity, then tacked on interest. The legal document would reflect the latter amount, but without any indication that interest had been charged. Thus if a man lent another the equivalent of 80 bushels of wheat, the document might reflect payment of 100 bushels. Normally such contracts were worked out by the steward (supposedly, but rarely, without his master's knowledge). In this story, the steward had been caught handling funds irresponsibly and was about to be fired. In order to ingratiate himself with potential employers, he called in his master's debtors and rewrote their bills to reflect the original amount of the loans *without interest*. Thus what he did was *remove* something technically illegal he had done in the past. This put his master in a tough spot. He could hardly make a fuss, for then he would have to admit compliance with unlawful usury. Realizing he has been outwitted, he commends the steward for his "righteous" act (whatever the motive), thus salvaging his piety if nothing else.

#### **ii. The Application (verses 9-13)**

What applications should we draw from this story of blatant dishonesty? Note the following:

- Verse 9 - As the manager used money to make friends, so the Christian should use his worldly possessions to accomplish spiritual good in the lives of others so that they will joyfully welcome him into eternity.
- Verses 10-12 - Little things count - how you use small things shows how you would use big ones; how you treat someone else's property says much about your attitude toward your own, and ultimately toward that which belongs to God. God will only entrust large responsibilities to those who have shown themselves faithful in carrying out small ones.
- Verse 13 - There can be no divided allegiance, especially between God and material possessions (cf. Matthew 6:24).

### **B. Unworthy Servants (Luke 17:7-10)**

This brief parable deals with the Christian's attitude toward his service for Christ. Jesus indicates that service should be motivated by love and a sense of duty, not desire for reward or a sense of desert. The

KJV in this parable speaks of “unprofitable” servants. This in no way denigrates the work of a Christian, but simply acknowledges that God is not “making a profit” in His dealings with His people. No matter how much a Christian does, he is not giving more than he is receiving. While a Christian is promised a reward, he should never think it is earned or deserved.

### **C. The Parable of the Pounds (Luke 19:11-27)**

This parable deals with the Christian’s diligence in his service for Christ.

#### **i. The Context**

The parable was told in Jericho, at the house of Zacchaeus. The motivation for the parable comes not from anything that occurred there, but from the persistent expectations of the disciples that the Kingdom was about to be set up on earth. Jesus indicates that the disciples’ responsibility will be to act as stewards, not rulers.

#### **ii. The Parable**

A nobleman entrusts a *mina* (about three months’ wages) apiece to ten of his servants. Their diligence varies, and those who have used the money wisely receive important responsibilities, while those who have not receive none.

#### **iii. The Application**

The *mina* represents something that all Christians receive alike (contra Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25), and is probably a reference to the Gospel itself. Those who are faithful stewards of the Gospel receive the privilege of greater service, while those who sit around and do nothing are no longer able to serve. Thus we must conclude that the “waiting” that occupies the present age is to involve active service, not passive anticipation.

### **3. Church Leaders as Stewards (Luke 20:9-19)**

We have already seen church leaders portrayed as stewards. Here they are seen as tenant farmers.

#### **A. The Context (verses 1-8)**

The Jewish religious leaders came to Jesus and challenged His authority. They obviously didn’t recognize that their authority had come from *Him*. He neatly avoided their little trap and revealed their hypocrisy, then told them a parable.

#### **B. The Parable (verses 9-16)**

A man rented a vineyard to a tenant farmer, who at harvest time refused to acknowledge his authority or give him the payment due to him. The servants who came to collect were beaten and otherwise mistreated. The owner then sent his son, who was murdered by the tenants. The owner then destroyed the tenants and rented the vineyard to others.



### **C. The Application (verses 17-19)**

The Jewish religious leaders had abused their positions, and the Kingdom of God was to be taken from them and entrusted to others. The stone is Christ Himself - those who fall upon Him will be broken in repentance, but those upon whom He falls will be crushed in judgment.

### **Conclusion**

Close by asking your students which way they will respond to Christ and reminding them of the basic applications mentioned in the Lesson Background.



## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## PARABLES OF STEWARDSHIP

1. Several of today's parables made reference to the Second Coming of Christ. Why is the Second Coming presented as a motivation to good stewardship?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. All we have comes from God. List one way in which you can exercise good stewardship over each of the following: (NOTE: If you are not a Christian, not all of the categories apply, but some of them do.)
  - A. Material possessions -
  
  - B. The physical world -
  
  - C. Talents and abilities -
  
  - D. The Word of God -
  
  - E. The Gospel -
  
  - F. Spiritual gifts -
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What responsibilities do you have at home? How can you carry them out "as if you were serving the Lord" (Ephesians 6:7)?



# **PARABLES OF PRIORITIES**

**Luke 12:16-21; 14:16-24; Matthew 22:1-14**

## **Lesson Aim**

To enable the students to see that the things that are important to the world are insignificant in the spiritual realm, and that the values of the Kingdom are far superior to those of the world.

## **Memory Verse**

**Matthew 13:15** - "For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn, and I would heal them."

## **Lesson Background**

The teenage years are years when the world has great allure. Though students are being faced with the prospect of decisions regarding the future, life after death often does not carry immediate impact in their minds. The weighing of temporal and spiritual priorities is therefore very difficult.

The three parables to be considered today all deal with those who foolishly reject the Kingdom of God in order to chase after those things that "moth and rust destroy, and thieves break in and steal." The absolute priority of spiritual things is a cliché given lip-service by most Christian teens, but all too often it is not put into practice. It should also be noted that the third parable contains a serious warning for professing Christians. Some think that they may cling to their worldly priorities within the doors of the Kingdom itself, but their shabby attire will betray them every time.

The key thought in today's lesson is expressed well in words spoken by Jim Elliot, a missionary martyred by Waodani tribesmen in Ecuador in 1957: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

## **Lesson Procedure**

"Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." This cliché is a composite of several phrases found in various places in Scripture. Ask your students what this sentence conveys to them. Hopefully they will pick up on the materialism, hedonism, and refusal to acknowledge any accountability after death implicit in the expression. Such an attitude is dominant in our world today, and is strongly reflected in advertising and the media. Ask your students for examples of this philosophy in TV commercials, popular culture, etc. Sadly, this same philosophy is often seen in those who profess to be Christians.

Jesus, during His earthly ministry, told several parables that emphasized the priority of the spiritual over the material. Most of these were directed at those who blatantly rejected the Kingdom of God (some of your students may fit in here, of course), but they also have something to say to professing Christians who are tempted to misplace their priorities.

### **1. The Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21)**

#### **A. The Context (verses 13-15)**

This parable was told in response to a question from the crowd to which Jesus was speaking. A man asked Jesus to arbitrate a dispute between him and his brother. Whether his brother had cheated him out of his rightful share or whether he wanted an even split instead of the traditional 2/3 - 1/3 division (see discussion of primogeniture in Lesson 4) is impossible to tell from the passage and is of secondary importance anyway. Jesus discerned the man's motive in asking the question, and it clearly was one of greed. (Note that one does not have to be wealthy in order to be greedy.)

#### **B. The Parable (verses 16-20)**

A rich man decides to expand the storage capacity of his farm in order to provide for his future security. His long-range planning turns out to be very short-sighted, however, when he dies that same night.

#### **C. The Application (verse 21)**

Several applications can be made:

- Security is not found in material things - not in property, nor money in the bank, nor insurance policies.
- The only true long-range planning is that which takes eternity into account.
- "You can't take it with you." We should give priority to that which is lasting.

## **2. The Banquet (Luke 14:16-24)**

### **A. The Context (verses 1-15).**

Jesus had been invited to dinner at the home of a Pharisee. By this time in His ministry, the Pharisees were generally hostile, and beneath the cover of civility were watching Him like hawks, looking for evidence they could use against Him. The dinner was on the Sabbath, and Jesus, as He often did, healed a man in the group who had dropsy, a potentially fatal disease. He then criticized the guests for their desire for acclaim and attention, as well as for their self-seeking “generosity.” When Jesus spoke of the reward awaiting those who showed true generosity, a pious member of the group responded by saying, “Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the Kingdom of God.” Jesus, however, discerned in this statement an error characteristic of the Pharisees - the presumption that they would be present at that great feast. As Jesus’ parable indicates, that presumption had no basis whatever.

### **B. The Parable (verses 16-24)**

A man was planning a banquet. In the Middle East in those days (and to some extent today as well), there was not a well-developed sense of time, or any great value placed on punctuality. Consequently, when someone planned a dinner, he would notify the guests of the day when it was to be held, and then, rather than designating a time, would send his servants to fetch the guests when the dinner was ready. On this particular occasion, all the invited guests made excuses, and foolish excuses at that. Who would be dumb enough to buy land or oxen without seeing them first? People like that would be suckers for land deals in Florida or used-car salesmen. As far as the one who got married is concerned, no self-respecting male in that patriarchal society would let a wife interfere with his social responsibilities - this, too, was a lame excuse. The man giving the banquet then ordered his servant to bring in the poor and disabled to fill the empty places of those who had refused.

### **C. The Application**

For the Pharisees, the application was obvious - these men who were confident of a place in the Kingdom would be left out. Their excuses for rejecting Jesus (“He eats with tax collectors and sinners”; “He breaks the Sabbath”; “His disciples don’t fast or wash their hands”) were no better than those used by the banquet guests.

What excuses do your students use to avoid coming to or obeying the Lord? Whatever those excuses may be, the things they are putting before Christ are not worth missing out on the greatest of banquets.

## **3. The Wedding Feast (Matthew 22:1-14)**

### **A. The Context**

This parable was spoken three days before Jesus’ death, as He was standing in the Temple surrounded by religious leaders. This parable is similar in many ways to the parable of the Banquet, but it is more blunt in its promise of judgment.

## **B. The Parable**

We will note here only the differences from the previous parable. The one giving the feast here is a king, and it is a wedding feast for his son (obvious references to God and Jesus). The invited guests are even ruder than before, not bothering even to make implausible excuses, while mistreating the messengers. Their fate is different as well - they are slaughtered, not merely ignored and left out. This parable adds to the last one by mentioning a man who dares to enter the banquet hall dressed inappropriately. He is promptly and finally excluded.

## **C. The Application**

To the religious leaders the parable promises judgment, as well as alluding to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. But the major application for your class comes from the second part of the parable. How could a man be foolish enough to try to enter the Kingdom of God clothed in his own works of righteousness, filthy rags though they be in God's sight? Entrance to the banquet hall is free, but you must wear the clothing supplied by the host - the pure righteousness of Christ. For your students, this again is a question of priorities. Who is to be put first in their lives - God or themselves?



## **FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT**

## **PARABLES OF PRIORITIES**

1. Why does the world view Christians and their priorities as foolish? Why does the Bible indicate that the world's priorities are foolish?
2. During the week, make note of five television commercials that encourage unbiblical priorities. What teachings of Scripture counteract the thrust of these advertisements?
3. What do you need to do to avoid being like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, who prided themselves on their piety, yet concentrated on outward things and ignored true spiritual values?



# **PARABLES OF PRAYER**

**Luke 11:5-10; 18:1-14**

## **Lesson Aim**

To encourage students in persistent and godly prayer.

## **Memory Verse**

**Matthew 13:16** - “But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.”

## **Lesson Background**

Today we consider three parables told by Jesus on the subject of prayer. The first two encourage persistence in prayer, while the last distinguishes between prayers that are acceptable and unacceptable in God’s sight.

For those who take the sovereignty of God seriously, the demand for persistence in prayer is sometimes difficult to understand. We know that God’s purposes will neither be altered nor thwarted. Human reasoning might then ask why we should petition God repeatedly for that which He has already purposed inalterably either to do or not to do. Of course, the fact that God commands persistence in prayer is reason enough for His people to do it. But it also is helpful to realize that God accomplishes His purposes through the use of means, and that prayer is one of those means. Thus persistent prayer really does make a difference.

As far as the nature of acceptable prayer is concerned, the final parable in the lesson will be very important for the unbelievers in your class. Many of them are, like the Pharisee, putting on a religious charade, but their prayers go no further than the ceiling because they speak on the basis of their own supposed merits rather than those of Christ.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the lesson by looking at Matthew 6:5-8. Ask the students to list the “do’s and don’t’s of prayer” found in this passage. They should be able to discern fairly quickly that prayer is to be directed toward God, not others, and that prayer is to be simple and sincere communication, not wordy, repetitious ritual. The parables we are to examine today make both of these points. The two parables about persistence bring out the difference between fervent persistence and meaningless repetition, while the parable dealing with acceptable prayer illustrates the very situation Jesus describes in Matthew 6:5.

### **1. Persistent Prayer**

In this section we will look at the parables themselves separately, then lump them together for purposes of application.

#### **A. The Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-10)**

##### **i. The Context (verses 1-4)**

Jesus’ disciples requested instruction in prayer, and He gave them a model to go by. He then told a parable intended to encourage them in the work of prayer.

##### **ii. The Parable (verses 5-8)**

In the Middle East, the responsibility to give hospitality is taken very seriously. Even your enemies are inviolate when they are guests in your home. To fail to provide hospitality is to bring great shame upon yourself. Thus, the man who received an unexpected guest at midnight was embarrassed to find he had no food in the house, and hurriedly roused his neighbor. The neighbor was reluctant to help because, in the typical one-room house, the family members would sleep together on a raised platform at one end of the room, and the family’s animals (chickens, goats, etc.), would sleep on the dirt floor. To get up would mean arousing both animals and children, and would probably end all chance of sleep for the night. If the neighbor pesters him long enough, however, he’ll finally realize that his family is being awakened anyway and will get the food.

#### **B. The Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8)**

##### **i. The Context (verse 1)**

The brief context indicates only that Jesus told the parable to encourage persistence. Some try to tie the parable to the context of Jesus’ discussion of His Second Coming in Luke 17:20-37, and the application made in verses 6-8 would tend to support this connection. However, most Gospel harmonies place other incidents between chapters 17 and 18, so the connection is tenuous at best.

##### **ii. The Parable (verses 2-5)**

Widows in the first century were the epitome of helplessness. With no hope of getting a job and no family to support them, they were often treated mercilessly by the cruel Roman society. This particular widow was being oppressed, perhaps by a creditor who was trying to evict her from her home, and she had

the misfortune to live in a town where the ultimate authority was a judge who considered himself totally autonomous, accountable to no one. Though he at first ignored her continual entreaties, he finally gave her justice simply to get her off his back.

### **C. The Application of the Parables (Luke 11:9-10; 18:6-8)**

In both cases, one should not get the idea that God is being compared to the grouchy neighbor or the corrupt judge. The form of argument is one typical of Jewish rabbinical scholars, one that I will call for the sake of simplicity a “how much more” argument (the technical Latin term is *a fortiori*). The strength of application in the parables is drawn from the contrast between God and the disreputable figures in the stories. Jesus is saying, in effect, “If persistence gets good results from such selfish and uncaring people, how much more will persistence bring a response from a loving and caring Heavenly Father?” Thus we must conclude that God does not need to be nagged, but promises to respond to the sincere cries of His people.

Before moving on, one difference in application between the two parables should be noted (ask your students if they can figure out what it is). The first parable emphasizes God’s response to pleas for provision, while the second concentrates on pleas for deliverance. God will take care of His people while they are in this world, and will ultimately take them out of this world to be with Him forever.

## **2. Acceptable Prayer**

Here we look at the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14.

### **A. The Context (verse 9)**

Jesus speaks this parable against the self-righteous Pharisees and their prayers that were intended more for those around them than for God.

### **B. The Parable (verses 10-13)**

The Pharisees were the guardians of the Jewish law, men who built “fences” around the law consisting of traditions that, though designed to help people obey the law, wound up obscuring and perverting the law. The prayer given here is not a caricature. The Talmud contains many examples of such prayers (e.g., “I thank Thee, O God, King of the Universe, that Thou hast not made me a Gentile, a dog, or a woman”). In this example, the prominence of the first-person singular pronoun gives away the speaker’s main focus. He prides himself on his external behavior, both in what he does not do (sins of the flesh) and in what he does do (works of supererogation - fasting was only required once a year, on the Day of Atonement, and only certain things needed to be tithed - cf. Matthew 23:23), while ignoring the condition of his heart.

The tax collector was a despised man in Jewish society. Not only did he collaborate with the hated Roman overlords, but he made his living by keeping whatever he collected over and above his quota, i.e., by taking from the pockets of his fellow Jews. His prayer is seen as a model because of its humility, in both posture and words.

### **C. The Application (verse 14)**

One who is justified has been declared righteous. Actually, both men went home justified, but the Pharisee had declared himself to be righteous, while the tax collector had been declared righteous by God.

Thus we learn that one who comes to God in prayer must come humbly, realizing both who God is and who he is. A man who trumpets his virtues before God knows neither.

Two specific applications can be drawn. For the unbelievers in your class, remind them that if they declare themselves to be righteous, they will stand alone. God will hear their prayers only if they come to Him acknowledging sin and pleading for mercy.

For believers, the warning involves a more insidious danger. Pride for the Christian often sneaks up and undermines fellowship with God and effective prayer. While the Pharisee said, “I thank you that I am not like . . . this tax collector,” may we not ignore this parable’s warning by saying, “I thank you that I am not like this Pharisee!”

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

## PARABLES OF PRAYER

1. Make a list of goals for your own prayer life based on the parables of Luke 11:1-10; 18:1-14.
2. Why did Jesus use such unattractive figures as the grouchy neighbor and the corrupt judge to illustrate His point about how we should come to God in prayer?
3. Analyze the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:1-14. What does each man's prayer imply about his view of God? of himself and his spiritual condition?
4. What warning should be heeded by a Christian in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, despite the fact that the Pharisee clearly is not a believer?





# **A PARABLE OF LOVE**

**Luke 10:30-37**

## **Lesson Aim**

To clarify for students both the nature and scope of the love Christians are to show to others.

## **Memory Verse**

Matthew 13:17 - "For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."

## **Lesson Background**

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is perhaps the best known of all of Jesus' parables. Something of the relationship between Jews and Samaritans must be understood in order to get the full force of the parable.

When the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., the Jews were subjected to a forced mixing of populations (see Quarter 2 [Intertestamental Period], Lesson 1). Many Jews were scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire, and peoples from other parts of the empire were transplanted in Palestine. Unlike the Southern Kingdom Jews later in Babylon, these Jews eventually intermarried with the other captive populations. The people resulting from this intermarriage in Palestine came to be called Samaritans. They were both racial and religious half-breeds. Their religion was an amalgam of Jewish and pagan elements. The Samaritans were looked down upon by the pure-blooded Jews of the South, and as a result they bitterly resented their Jewish neighbors. This resentment grew so that by the time of Jesus, the

two groups to a large extent avoided all contact with one another. Consequently, when Jesus tells the Jewish legal scholar that the Samaritan is his neighbor, He means that everyone is the neighbor of the child of God.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Sometimes people try to make their work easier by narrowing the scope of the job they have to do. Suppose your mother tells you to clean your room. If you take everything and shove it into a closet or under your bed, the room may have the same outward appearance as if you had really cleaned it, but it wouldn't be really clean. By putting things out of sight rather than where they belong, your room may be given the appearance of cleanliness, but it wouldn't be really clean! We often use such shortcuts to make ourselves look good. Jesus encountered a man one day who was trying to do the same thing in the spiritual realm.

### **1. The Context (Luke 10:25-29)**

One day an expert in the law was listening to Jesus as He spoke. This man was not a lawyer as we would use the term today, but a scholar who specialized in the study of the Old Testament. He asked Jesus a question that was designed as a test. This was not one of those subtle traps often laid by the Pharisees, where they hoped to get Jesus in trouble however He answered, but instead a question to which the scholar already had an answer. His purpose was to measure Jesus' wisdom and understanding against the standard of his own scholarship. Matching wits with Jesus, however, was not a good idea. Jesus first turned the question back to the lawyer, eliciting his opinion. The answer given, quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, is an excellent one. In fact, it is the same answer Jesus Himself gave to the crafty Pharisees in Matthew 22:34-40.

Jesus commended the man's answer, but at the same time revealed the fatal flaw in his question. The lawyer made the mistake of assuming that eternal life is gained by doing something, much as the Rich Young Ruler did later. When Jesus answered that eternal life could be gained by keeping the two indicated commandments, He was speaking truly. Of course, to do this, one would have to be perfect, since these commandments sum up the entire will of God for man, and thus include all God's other commandments (Matthew 22:40). To the lawyer's credit, he realized this. But rather than seeking the grace needed to meet God's standard, he, like the teenager in the opening illustration, tried to narrow the standard. He did this by seeking to redefine the word "neighbor." (Note the implicit assumption that his love for God was quite adequate, thank you.) This approach was rather common among the religious leaders of Jesus' day (cf. Matthew 5:43).

### **2. The Parable (Luke 10:30-35)**

A man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jerusalem is in the central mountain range that forms the "spine" of Palestine, while Jericho is an oasis in the Jordan Valley, well below sea level. Between the two cities lies the rocky, barren Judean wilderness, rough country that supports only a few shepherds, monks, and roving bands of outlaws. Few men had the courage (or the folly) to walk the Jerusalem-Jericho road alone, even in daylight. (It was in this same area, by the way, that Jesus was tempted by Satan.) This Jewish man found the trouble he was inviting - he was mugged by a band of robbers who took everything, even his clothes, and left him wounded and bleeding.

Before long, both a priest and a Levite came down the road, but they both ignored the man. We're not given the reason, but it may be fair to assume that, since contact with the dead rendered one ceremonially

unclean, they were hesitant to defile themselves lest they be unable to perform their religious duties that day. For whatever reason, they gave the man a wide berth.

Finally a Samaritan, despised by the Jews, came along. He tended the man's wounds, applying oil for cleansing and soothing and wine as an antiseptic. He then spent his own time and money to take the wounded man to an inn and see that he was given care and allowed to recuperate.

### **3. The Application (Luke 10:36-37)**

The application drawn by Jesus is that the Samaritan was the neighbor of the wounded Jew. Jesus would not allow the man to think himself righteous because he loved those who loved him. He must show love to all, and the love he must show is unconditional - not dependent on the response of the people upon whom it is bestowed. It should also be noted that one cannot, as the priest and Levite tried to do, use love for God as an excuse for failure to love other people. One who does not love his neighbor does not really love God either.

The parable also has important applications for the church in the twenty-first century. The Samaritans no longer exist, but there is no shortage of despised outcasts in the world in which we live. Ask your students to give some examples of those who might be considered "Samaritans" today (in a world where racial prejudice is so prevalent, this shouldn't be too difficult). Then spend some time talking about how the church, and the individuals in the church, can show love to these "neighbors."

Close the session by reminding students to be careful to avoid the dual mistakes of the lawyer. They cannot afford either to reduce the scope of God's commands or to think that eternal life may be gained by their own efforts.



**FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT**

**A PARABLE OF LOVE**

Read through the Gospel of Luke this week and list all the “outcasts” to whom Jesus ministered. Note how He treated them and consider what the equivalent to such a person might be in today’s society.

PASSAGE	TYPE OF OUTCAST	JESUS’ RESPONSE	MODERN EQUIVALENT



# **A PARABLE OF EVIL**

**Luke 13:1-9**

## **Lesson Aim**

To give students a biblical perspective on the problem of evil as seen within the context of the sovereignty of God.

## **Memory Verse**

Review **Matthew 13:10-17**.

## **Lesson Background**

This lesson is perhaps one of the most intellectually challenging in the entire curriculum. Philosophers have long challenged Christians with the following dilemma: "If evil exists, God cannot be both loving and omnipotent. If God were able to eradicate evil and chose not to, He would not be loving. If He desired to prevent evil but could not, He would be less than omnipotent."

It is not only Christians who face this dilemma. All philosophies and religions must deal with the incongruity posed by suffering. Most, however, solve the problem by denying one of its three components. Hindus simply deny the existence of evil, maintaining that this life is no more than illusion. Muslims deny that God is loving, readily affirming that Allah causes evil as well as good. Dualists of all kinds deny the omnipotence of God, insisting that good and evil are locked in a never-ending struggle for dominance in the universe. Christians, of course, do not have these options. We must affirm what the Bible teaches - that evil is a reality, that God is a loving God, and that He is omnipotent.

This lesson does not pretend to give a final answer to this dilemma, but does propose a biblical perspective from which it may be viewed. Jesus told His parable in response to very painful evidences of evil in the world. Hopefully His response will be an encouragement to the students who have to deal with this problem, both in theory and in practice.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin by proposing to the class the dilemma of evil as stated in the introduction. You will find that their responses to it often differ little from the “cop-out” approaches of non-Christian religions and secular philosophies. For instance, you may get variations on the following:

- What seems evil to us is really being used by God to accomplish good (evil doesn’t exist).
- God created man with free will, and God is not able to prevent evil without making man a puppet (God is not omnipotent).
- God seeks His glory, not man’s good, and that glory is advanced by the judgment of sin and sinners (God is not loving).

Though all of these answers contain some truth, none satisfies the dilemma by accounting for all three of its factors. Having frustrated your students’ attempts to deal with the problem, and thus demonstrating its difficulty, you are now ready to take them to Luke 13:1-9, where Jesus is asked to deal with this same question.

### **1. The Context (verses 1, 4)**

Jesus is confronted in this passage with two terrible tragedies. In the first instance, we have an unprovoked slaughter of Jews by Pilate. Galilee was known to be a hotbed of Zealot activity, and Pilate was a very insecure man. Apparently a group of Galileans had come to Jerusalem to worship, and Pilate, perhaps hearing rumors of an insurrection, had called out the troops. The result was a massacre, perhaps in the Temple court itself.

Jesus Himself then brings up a recent accident. The Tower of Siloam, a watchtower along the southeastern wall of the city near the Pool of Siloam, had collapsed, killing eighteen people. He thus was faced with the two types of disasters that most often bring forth cries of “Why, God?” - human injustice and natural calamity.

### **2. The Parable (verses 6-9)**

A fig tree in a vineyard was producing nothing, and the owner wanted it removed. The caretaker pleaded for patience, for another year in which to fertilize and nurture the tree. The owner agreed, with the stipulation that it be cut down if it yielded no fruit the following year.

### **3. The Application (verses 2-5)**

Jesus does not here solve the problem of evil, but He does give a fresh and biblical perspective on it.



## **A. The Perspective of His Listeners**

It was commonly believed among the Jews of Jesus' day that victims of disease, human cruelty, and natural disasters were recipients of the judgment of God upon some secret sins (cf. John 9:2; see also the arguments of Job's friends in the book of Job). Consequently, when someone suffered or died in such a way, others would be able to feel themselves smug and superior - obviously they were not great sinners, since they were still breathing!

## **B. The Response of Jesus to His Listeners**

Jesus indicates to His listeners that they should not be gossiping among themselves about the secret villainies of those who had died, but instead should see themselves as barren fig trees who were standing only because of the patience of their Creator. They need to concentrate on their own sin, not on the sins of others. "Unless you repent, you too will all perish."

## **C. The Perspective of Today's Questioners**

People today tend more often to place the blame for human cruelty and natural disasters on God than on the victims. They question the love, power, or fairness of a God who could allow such things to happen.

## **D. Jesus' Response to Today's Questioners**

Jesus' parable again challenges the hidden assumptions of those who would accuse God. People who raise such questions are presupposing that life is the right of all and that only the overtly wicked are deserving of untimely death. But Jesus turns the question around. His parable indicates that the proper response to cruelty and disaster should not be amazement at why these people died, but rather amazement at the fact that I am still living. Sinners deserve nothing but destruction. The fact that some continue to live should be a source of great wonder, and of praise to a merciful and patient God. Instead of accusing God of injustice, we should be thanking Him for His incredible mercy.

## **Conclusion**

The problem of evil is not a question to be answered. Two responses are appropriate. In the first place, the phrasing of the dilemma betrays an unbiblical view of man and sin. One with a biblical perspective will praise God, not challenge Him. Secondly, God does not reveal the logic of His ways to man. We should not expect to understand all that God does, but should trust Him - after all, what is faith if not trust that goes beyond perception and understanding? Isaiah 55:8-9 still applies.







# **PARABLES OF DISCIPLESHIP**

**Luke 5:36-39; 14:28-33**

## **Lesson Aim**

To emphasize for your students that being a follower of Jesus involves the breaking down of old ways of living and the formation of completely new ones.

## **Memory Verse**

**Matthew 13:34** - "Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; He did not say anything to them without using a parable."

## **Lesson Background**

Jesus on many occasions stressed the radical nature of discipleship, using phrases like "hating father and mother," "forsaking all," "taking up the cross," "losing your life," etc. Despite this strong language, many of those around Jesus resisted any suggestion of breaking free from their old manner of life. Some, like the religious leaders, fully expected Jesus to conform Himself to their mold. They were secure in their righteousness and expected Jesus to act like them. Others, like the huge crowds that followed Jesus through much of His ministry, wanted blessing without change, benefit without suffering, food and healing without commitment.

The parables to be examined today deal with both of these problems. The first shows the destructiveness of trying to force Jesus' teachings into a preconceived mold, while the latter two demonstrate both the folly and danger of anything short of total commitment. You probably have students in your class who fit into both of these categories - those who insist that Christ must fit their mold and those who want to be identified with Christ without any substantial commitment. Though the lesson is aimed primarily at such

students, those in your class who are true disciples can benefit from seeing the necessity of the radical difference demanded by Jesus of His followers.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Begin the class by reading the poem, “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” by John G. Saxe (copy enclosed). The poem describes a situation in which each of the blind men insists that all of the elephant conforms to his narrow perception of it. Throughout history, many men have done to Jesus what the blind men did to the elephant, recasting Him in the mold of their own thought. He has been seen as a teacher, a healer, a humanitarian, a revolutionary, and a philosopher. As with the blind men, each of these views “was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong.”

Many in Jesus’ day also tried to force Him into their own preconceived molds. Most notorious among these were the religious leaders, particularly the Pharisees. One day, Jesus told a brief parable to show that His followers must break out of their old molds and come after Him into a new manner of life.

### **1. Garments and Wineskins (Luke 5:36-39)**

#### **A. The Context (verses 27-35)**

Jesus had just called Levi (Matthew) the tax collector to follow Him. Levi promptly left his tax booth, and soon after held a banquet for Jesus and many of his friends. The Pharisees soon appeared and criticized Jesus and His disciples for keeping company with “sinners” and failing to observe frequent fasts. The Pharisees had fixed in their minds an idea of what piety should be. This piety was defined by their own traditions. By their behavior, they inferred that, if Jesus did not conform to their standard, He could not be holy.

At this point, ask your students to come up with some modern examples of the type of thinking engaged in by the Pharisees. Reminding them of last week’s lesson should help get them started. Most such objections take the form, “I can’t believe in a God who would \_\_\_\_\_” (the blank may be filled with “send anyone to Hell,” “allow little children to starve,” “permit wars and injustice,” etc.).

#### **B. The Parable (verses 36-38)**

##### **i. The Garment**

In Jesus’ day, as is true today, clothing tended to shrink when washed for the first time. Thus, anyone who sewed an unshrunk patch onto an old piece of clothing would find that, when washed, the patch would shrink, tearing an even larger piece out of the old cloth.

Also, colors in cloth tend to fade as the clothing gets old. Thus, a new patch would not match the color of old cloth. For both of these reasons, it would be foolish to tear up a new garment to make a patch for an old one.

## **ii. The Wineskins**

Wine in Jesus' day was carried in goatskin bags. When new, these bags were soft and supple, but as they got older, they would become hard and brittle. Wine, of course, as it ferments, gives off gases. If new wine were put into new wineskins, the skins were flexible enough to expand as fermentation occurred. However, if new wine were put into old wineskins, the increased pressure of the gases would burst the skins, and both wine and wineskins would be lost.

### **C. The Application (verse 39)**

Give your students a chance to figure out the significance of the parable. They will probably have trouble, so take them through it step by step. Once you tell them that the old garment and old wineskins refer to the traditions of the Pharisees, while the new garment, new patch, new wineskins, and new wine refer to the teachings of Jesus, they should be able to put things together.

Jesus is saying that His teachings are incompatible with the traditions of the Pharisees, as they are with any man-made system of thought. If someone tries to fit Jesus' teachings into their old ways of thinking, "something's gotta give" - and that "something" is the old garment, the old wineskin. A person cannot follow Jesus in his own way.

Verse 39 adds another dimension to the application that must be considered, and that is the innate resistance to change of human nature. One who tastes old wine and likes it has no desire to taste new wine. The Pharisees were satisfied with what they had and actually feared change. Many people today fear Christ in the same way. They fear His demands, His standards, what they may have to give up. Such ignorance is no different from that of the Pharisees.

## **2. The Tower-Builder and the King (Luke 14:28-33)**

It is not only those who try to force Christ's teachings into some preconceived philosophy who are guilty of following Him in their own way, however. Much more numerous are those who profess to be followers of Christ, yet seek no more than a half-hearted commitment. Jesus told two parables in Luke 14 to just such a group.

### **A. The Context (verses 25-27)**

The majority of those in the crowds that followed Jesus were there for the wrong reasons - to see miracles, to be healed, to be fed. Jesus used progressively stronger language on these people throughout His ministry, and finally most of them, unwilling to commit themselves fully to Him, turned away.

### **B. The Parables (verses 28-32)**

#### **i. The Tower-Builder**

A man begins a building without sufficient planning and runs out of money halfway through the project, leaving himself open to justifiable ridicule.

## **ii. The King**

A king is getting ready for war, but is outnumbered two to one. If he is wise, he will negotiate a peace settlement rather than having his army wiped out.

### **C. The Application (verse 33)**

The two brief parables present two sides of the same issue. The first asks, “Can you afford to follow Me?” A man who makes a half-hearted commitment opens himself to deserved scorn and winds up losing everything. The second parable asks, “Can you afford not to follow Me?” The man in a position to consider this question must see that Christ is not his friend, but his enemy. Should he decide against making peace with Christ, the result would be utter destruction. Yet he must realize that, under the circumstances, making peace involves total surrender - there can be no negotiated truce. Thus, as Jesus concludes, anyone “who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”



## “THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT”

by John G. Saxe

It was six men of Indostan to learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the elephant (though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation might satisfy his mind.

The first approached the elephant and, happening to fall  
Against the broad and sturdy side, at once began to bawl:  
“Why, bless me! but the elephant is very like a wall!”

The second, feeling of the tusk, cried: “Ho! what have we here  
So very round and smooth and sharp? To me ‘tis very clear,  
This wonder of an elephant is very like a spear!”

The third approached the animal, and, happening to take  
The squirming trunk within his hands, thus boldly he spake:  
“I see,” quoth he, “the elephant is very like a snake!”

The fourth reached out his eager hand and felt about the knee:  
“What most this wondrous beast is like is very plain,” quoth he:  
“‘Tis clear enough the elephant is very like a tree!”

The fifth who chanced to touch the ear, said: “E’en the blindest man  
Can tell what this resembles most - deny the fact who can:  
This marvel of an elephant is very like a fan!”

The sixth no sooner had begun about the beast to grope  
Than, seizing on the swinging tail that fell within his scope,  
“I see,” quoth he, “the elephant is very like a rope!”

And so these men of Indostan disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion exceeding stiff and strong;  
Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong.







# **MORE PARABLES OF DISCIPLESHIP**

**Matthew 20:1-16; 21:28-32**

## **Lesson Aim**

To show the students two things that characterize a disciple of Jesus - that he doesn't just hear the Word, but also does it, and that he is motivated by love of Christ, not comparison with others.

## **Memory Verse**

**Matthew 13:35** - "So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.'"

## **Lesson Background**

One who is a follower of Christ must be one who loves Christ. People engage in religious activity for many reasons, but a true disciple serves Christ because he loves Him. The two parables to be considered today illustrate some of the things that can happen when a person seeks to serve Christ out of wrong motives.

For two reasons, we will be considering today's parables in the opposite order in which Jesus spoke them. In the first place, the second parable is directed toward the priests and elders, while the first is spoken to the disciples. Thus, the second parable has a broader, less specific application. In addition, the first parable is more difficult to explain and apply, and therefore is more effectively handled after the simpler parable rather than before.

The major application to be brought out of the parable of the Two Sons is that a disciple does the will of his Master. The religious leaders were hypocrites who talked a good game but didn't live in obedience to God. Perhaps some of your students are the same kind of phony disciples. The parable of the

Laborers in the Vineyard has as its main application the truth that a disciple serves his Master out of love, not out of a desire for reward, and does not destroy the joy of his service by comparing himself with others.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Start the lesson with the following example: Harold was a tenth-grader and was taking a class in geometry. The teacher had just finished explaining congruent triangles. Harold, meanwhile, was sitting in the back of the room, talking with one of his friends. “Harold, did you understand that last proof?” said the teacher. “Will you be able to do your homework when you get home?”

“Sure, no sweat,” responded Harold. “This stuff’s easy. I’ll get it done with no problem.” When he got home, however, Harold spent the evening watching television and didn’t even try the geometry problems.

The next week, the class had a test. Harold miraculously got a B-, which turned out to be the highest grade in the class. The grade, however, was the result of a large curve. Harold had gotten almost half the problems on the test wrong. His friend came up to him after class and said, “Hey, do you understand this stuff?”

“Nah, but who cares? I got a decent grade and beat everybody else in the class. Who needs to know these stupid proofs anyway?”

Ask the class what bad attitudes were displayed by Harold in the story. They should be able to see that he had no desire to do his work and was motivated by grades and the need to beat others rather than having any thirst for knowledge. Then tell the class that, in the same way that bad attitudes mar the work of students in school, bad attitudes mar the service of those who profess to be followers of Christ. The two parables we will be examining today illustrate some of those bad attitudes that work against true discipleship.

### **1. The Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32)**

#### **A. The Context (Verses 23-27)**

The religious leaders sent a delegation to Jesus to ask Him by what authority He spoke. In reality the question was a trap. If Jesus said His authority was from God, they would accuse Him of blasphemy; if He said it was from man, they would turn to the people and say, “See, that’s what we’ve been saying all along.” Jesus foiled them by asking a counter-question that turned the tables, while at the same time revealing the true motive for their question.

#### **B. The Parable (verse 28-30)**

A man had two sons, and he told them to spend the day working in his vineyard. The first adamantly refused, but later reconsidered and went. The second promptly agreed, but never showed up for the job.

#### **C. The Application (verses 31-32)**

Like the second son, the religious leaders mouthed pious platitudes, but didn’t back them up with obedience. Their attitude toward John the Baptist and Jesus Himself illustrates this. The real clincher, of

course, comes when Jesus tells them that the tax collectors and prostitutes (like the first son) are the ones who are really pleasing God.

For your students, the main application is that a disciple of Jesus must do more than profess to be a Christian. All the pious words in the world mean nothing apart from a life of obedience. One cannot claim to be a disciple of Jesus if there is no evidence of the Holy Spirit's work in that person's life.

## **2. The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16)**

### **A. The Context (19:23-30)**

Jesus had just been talking to the Rich Young Ruler. After he left, Jesus remarked on the difficulty involved in a rich man entering the Kingdom. The disciples were astonished at this, having been taught that riches were a mark of divine favor. Peter then responded that, unlike the young man, they had left everything to follow Christ. He then asked what their reward would be for this great sacrifice. Jesus indicated that they would be rewarded, but then tells a parable aimed at dealing with Peter's mercenary spirit.

### **B. The Parable (20:1-15)**

The owner of a vineyard needed extra workers, probably to take in a harvest. He went to the marketplace at sunrise, the beginning of the working day, and hired workers who were waiting there. He agreed to pay them a denarius for a day's work, which was the standard wage at that time. He went out again at 9:00 A.M., Noon, 3:00 P.M., and 5:00 P.M., and hired more workers each time, but with these groups there was no agreed-upon wage. At the end of the working day (6:00 P.M.), he paid each man a denarius, whether he had worked one hour or twelve. Those who had worked the longest immediately started complaining that those who had done less work had received equal remuneration. The owner responded that they had been treated justly, and that if he wanted to be generous to the other workers, it was none of their business.

### **C. The Application (20:16)**

The laborers who had been hired first clearly shared Peter's mercenary spirit. When Jesus says that "the last will be first and the first will be last," He is indicating that the rewards received by God's people are not based on merit, but on grace. The following points of application should be noted:

- One should serve Christ out of love and trust, not out of a desire for reward. The workers who were recipients of the owner's generosity had worked without a contract, trusting the owner to do what was right.
- God's treatment of His children is not on the basis of "so much work for so much pay." To think that one who gives more time to the church is deserving of a bigger heavenly mansion is to miss the point.
- God never underpays His servants. We always receive more than we deserve, never less.
- Comparing yourself with God's treatment of other Christians can be spiritually deadening. A servant's main concern is to be faithful to his master, not to worry about how the master is dealing with his other servants.

## **Conclusion**

Spend the remainder of your time talking with your students about this last matter of comparison. This is a real problem with teenagers (as well as with adults), and can lead to pride, depression, or even anger with God. Help your students see the importance of avoiding this all-too-common pitfall.







# **PARABLES OF THE SECOND COMING**

## **Matthew 25**

### **Lesson Aim**

To teach students what it means to be ready for the Second Coming of Christ.

### **Memory Verse**

**Matthew 13:52** - "He said to them, 'Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.'"

### **Lesson Background**

Three days before His death, Jesus and His disciples were sitting on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the magnificent building that was Herod's Temple. Jesus had earlier remarked that the Temple would one day be demolished, and His disciples now asked Him when that destruction would occur and what would be the signs of His return. Jesus answered these questions in what has come to be known as the Olivet Discourse. In Matthew 24, we see Jesus speaking about the last days. In Matthew 25, He tells three parables that expand on the basic exhortation of chapter 24 - that of readiness.

What does it mean to be ready for the Second Coming? Readiness is not a presumption that ignores preparation, nor is it standing on a mountaintop in white robes, nor is it an other-worldliness that ignores the temporal needs of those around us. Rather, readiness involves anticipation of Christ, preparation of oneself, and service that utilizes one's gifts and ministers to others. The three parables in this chapter serve to illustrate both the negative and positive aspects of readiness noted above. Be sure to point out to your students, however, that the greatest state of unreadiness for the Second Coming is that of the unregenerate heart.

## **Lesson Procedure**

Your students have by now had almost three months of experience in dealing with the parables of Jesus. Let them use the interpretive skills they have hopefully developed on the parables of Matthew 25. Divide the class into three groups and assign a parable to each group. Give the students each a sheet headed “Parables of the Second Coming” and have each group fill in the sheet for their parable, reminding them to read Matthew 24 as well to get the context. For the application, drop the hint that all three parables have something to say about the theme of readiness.

After giving them about fifteen minutes to fill in their sheets, call the groups back together and have each one report on their findings. Discuss the parables as the groups report and supplement their comments as necessary.

The context is the same for all three parables, so get input from all three groups in this area first. In Matthew 24, Jesus indicates that the last days will be characterized by increasing turmoil and persecution of God’s people. Furthermore, the world will be oblivious to their peril, going about the normal routines of life as though nothing will ever change. Christ’s followers, however, are not to be caught up in the world’s thinking. We must never live as if this life were all there is, but must be ready for the return of Christ, which could occur at any time. The parables then expound on what this readiness involves.

### **1. The Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13)**

#### **A. The Parable**

Some knowledge of Palestinian wedding customs is necessary to understand what is going on here. The virgins in the parable are like bridesmaids. At the time of the wedding, the groom and his retinue would go to the home of the bride, pick up the bride and bridesmaids, and then take them back to the home of the groom for the wedding festivities. Part of the fun was in trying to catch the girls unprepared, so the groom would often show up at an odd time of day or night. The bridesmaids in the parable were prepared for a night visitation, but some were better prepared than others. Those with insufficient oil ran out, and before they were able to get more, they had missed the procession and the doors of the feast were closed to them.

#### **B. The Application**

This is one parable where overly-detailed efforts to discern symbolism have often been counterproductive. Very simply put, readiness for the coming of Christ is here seen as perseverance, being ready at any time, not just for a brief duration. The presumption of the foolish virgins should serve as a warning to those who expect to be part of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb and yet are not persevering in the faith.

### **2. The Talents (verses 14-30)**

#### **A. The Parable**

This one is very similar to the parable of the Pounds, though there are a few notable differences. A talent is a measure of weight used for precious metals and represented an enormous fortune in gold (and a significant amount even if in silver). Unlike the parable of the Pounds, these servants are given differing amounts of money according to their ability. Another significant difference is that the judgment at the end of the parable falls on the lazy servant rather than rebellious citizens.

## **B. The Application**

Here we must see that readiness involves stewardship. Too often in the history of the church, people have thought to prepare themselves for the Second Coming by selling all their possessions and waiting in white robes on top of a mountain. Jesus makes it clear here that the best way to get ready for the Second Coming is to use time and gifts wisely in His service.

### **3. The Sheep and the Goats (verses 31-46)**

#### **A. The Parable**

Sheep and goats were often herded together by shepherds in first-century Palestine, but there were times when it would be necessary to separate them. See if your students can think of some reasons why (some possibilities might include shearing the sheep, milking the goats, keeping them apart during mating season, etc.). In the parable, Jesus simply tells of a shepherd dividing his flock.

#### **B. The Application**

The division of the flock is used as a symbol of the Last Judgment. The criteria upon which the separation is based indicate that the aspect of readiness being stressed here is one of service to those in need. One should not conclude from the parable that humanitarian deeds qualify a person for heaven. Instead, the point to be understood is that one who is truly in Christ will manifest that relationship through works of charity, and that those who care little for those in need obviously care little for Christ.

## **Conclusion**

End the lesson by summarizing the aspects of readiness emphasized in these parables - perseverance, stewardship, and service. Point out that foundational to all these is a faith relationship with Christ, without which no one can be ready for His coming.



## **PARABLES OF THE SECOND COMING**

**PARABLE -**

**REFERENCE -**

**CONTEXT OF THE PARABLE -**

**STORY OF THE PARABLE -**

**APPLICATION OF THE PARABLE -**





