

Unpacking the Parables of Jesus

A small group resource for discussing the parables

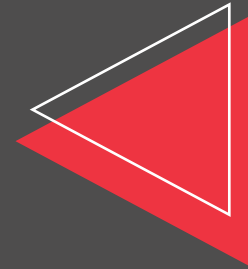
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Unpacking the Parables of Jesus

What do you think about when you hear the words “small group ministry?” Chances are, your mental image isn’t universally shared by everyone. You might think of the group that meets in your home. Someone else might think of a youth group, book club or Sunday school class they lead. Many different types of church gatherings operate as small groups.

While they may take many forms, one of the defining characteristics of a small group is that you’re not teaching as much as you’re trying to facilitate conversation. It requires finesse to keep the conversation on track and not to let it get hijacked by non-productive conversations or even become dominated by a few group members.


This resource is intended to help a small group leader run a productive discussion about Jesus’ parables. By using the parables as a jumping-off point for small group discussions, you’re guaranteed to hit many topics that are critical to understanding and following Jesus. But you’re also going to run up against some interesting challenges too.



The challenges of parable-based small group discussions

Sometimes small groups have one or two individuals who make it a challenge to stay on track. That could be because they can't stop monopolizing the conversation, always seem to take a discussion off course, or present any number of other challenges. Discussing the parables of Jesus can exacerbate the problem, and there are plenty of reasons why a small group leader has to stay vigilant when discussing them. It's critical to remember that while discussing the parables has potential challenges, it's well worth it.

Jesus offered the parables to get people to think about their world and relationship to God in new ways. They're not like Aesop's Fables with clear, straightforward morals. Sometimes His listeners struggled to understand them—including His own disciples. So it's no wonder that Jesus' followers would struggle with them today.





Here are a couple of common areas where small groups get off track when discussing the parables.

1. Some parables can be interpreted in multiple ways


When people come together from multiple church experiences or denominational backgrounds, they're used to hearing various parables interpreted in specific ways. When they hear someone share something different, they might feel the need to shut them down or "fix" their interpretation. If people are afraid of being shut down when they speak, they'll often stop trying to share, and you'll struggle to create open dialogue.

2. Some might attach significance to different elements

Sometimes people are exposed to teachers who take Jesus' parables and treat them allegorically, attaching symbolic significance to every element. This can get messy quickly, especially if they expect everyone to be on board with this interpretive strategy.

If you want to keep the conversation flowing, it will be helpful to set some ground rules. You're not teaching a class but leading a dialogue, which means everyone needs to feel like they can share without causing an argument. Everyone is coming from different backgrounds and experiences—and nobody today is coming from the background that Jesus' original audiences had! They may read these passages differently and come to different conclusions. Our job isn't to police each other's ideas.

But if the conversation runs too adrift from the point you're trying to establish, they should expect you to speak up and get everyone back on the main road.



Things to keep in mind when reading the parables

One of the most important things to keep in mind when reading Jesus' words is the fact that they had to make sense to His first audience. There can be a tendency to read Jesus' words in ways that suggest His intended audience was 21st-century readers rather than the people who were actually present.

When interpreting the parables, we can help ensure that we're closer to the center of the bullseye by focusing on the main principle or lesson Jesus was trying to impart. Jesus used these stories to drive a point home, and we can lose the thread if we're too focused on what every object or person in the parable represents.

How to use this resource

This guide will take you through Jesus' parables, offering questions and insights to help you lead small group discussions. You'll find links to informative articles and suggestions for keeping the conversation fruitful and engaging.

Each parable includes notes and additional context from our article, [“All the Parables of Jesus.”](#) which include links to Scriptural passages, information about the audience who was present to hear Him, the context in which the parable comes up, the parable's key verse, and a brief synopsis of the teaching. Many parables will include a link to articles offering a more in-depth examination.

You'll also find discussion objectives that suggest potential talking points and discussion targets, along with questions for small groups. Some questions will include notes offering insight into the question's purpose and potential pitfalls to try to avoid.

Important: *Some of the notes provide a more complete or “correct” answer to the question. The intention is for the leader to keep the discussion on track. If the dialogue starts drifting, it's helpful to come up with questions on the fly that can help direct people to the answers instead of definitively stating that you're offering the right answer. Once people get the feeling that you're going to eventually weigh in and tell them what's correct, they'll stop talking and wait for you to tell them what they think you want them to know.*

01

Passage: [Matthew 9:16–17](#),
[Mark 2:21–22](#), [Luke 5:36–38](#)

Audience: John the Baptist's disciples

Context: John's disciples ask Jesus why the Pharisees fast, but His disciples do not.

Key verse: "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse" (Matthew 9:16).



The Parables of New Cloth and New Wineskins

The first-century religious establishment had expectations for the Messiah. In their understanding, He would come and build upon the traditions and practices of Judaism. Even John the Baptist's disciples didn't understand why Jesus wasn't adhering to common Jewish observances.

Jesus tells them that any attempt to patch up what was lacking in Judaism's traditional expressions of righteousness would only make everything worse. Like a piece of unshrunk cloth sewn into an old garment or a new wine in an old wineskin, Jesus was bringing something that wouldn't fit into the religious traditions of the time.

Small group questions

- When we talk about peer pressure, we tend to focus on the people around us encouraging us to do bad things. But have you ever felt pressured by people around you to do something harmless or even helpful that you didn't want to do, but did anyway, just to avoid disapproval?
 - An example of this might be when the clerk turns the screen around after you swipe your card and you have to choose between three tipping options. You might want to tip 15% (the lower tier), but the clerk is standing right there so you choose one of the higher options.
- What are some religious observances that Jesus' contemporaries expected Him to keep?
- What is different between the new wine Jesus was bringing and the old wine of the Law?
 - While the heart of the Law was summed up in loving God and loving people (Matthew 22:36-30), it was too easy to go through the motions of the Law without having a heart that was close to God. Jesus came to give us new life from within so that truly loving God and loving others will come from our hearts and not through external rules.
- How does Jesus do what the Law could not?
 - Through His death, our inability to keep the Law on our own is forgiven. Through the Spirit, we are transformed and conformed from within to His image (Romans 8:29).
- In what ways do we try to hold ourselves or one another to the Law instead of the new wine of the gospel?
 - This question is intended to generate conversation around the ways that we may still try to impose external religious behaviors on one another that offer the impression of godliness, but don't necessarily make us closer to God.
- How can we encourage others in a way that is more in keeping with a Jesus-honoring life that comes from within—rather than a rules-oriented life that is put upon others?

02

Passage: [Matthew 5:14–16](#),
[Mark 4:21–22](#), [Luke 8:16](#)

Audience: A great crowd

Context: The sermon on the mount

Key verse: “In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).



The Parable of the Lamp Stand

First-century homes in Palestine were modest, and it didn't take much light to illuminate them. People used very small oil lamps which could easily fit under a small bowl. But the idea of lighting a lamp and putting it under a bowl is absurd. Not only would it be a waste of light, but it would also be a waste of oil. The only space that the lamp would illuminate would be the space under the bowl—so although the lamp would technically be producing light, that light would be completely useless to the people in the house.

Like a lamp, followers of Jesus shouldn't keep the light within them hidden. It should be seen clearly and evident to those around them.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“What Does It Mean to Be Salt and Light?”](#)

Small group questions

- Jesus was speaking to people without any electricity. What are some things we take for granted that Jesus' original audience wouldn't?
 - Firstly, we live in a world that's constantly illuminated. We flip a switch day or night, and our rooms are filled with light. We also don't often experience the kind of darkness first-century people did. Our homes have digital light from microwave clocks, red lights on smoke detectors, etc. Our world is filled with the ambient light of streetlamps, strip malls and more.
 - This question aims to help group members identify more with Jesus' original audience, so they can grasp more of the cultural significance of the parable.
- How was Jesus a lamp providing light to first-century Israelites? How did He provide that light?
 - In many ways, the Jews were in the dark about what God was like and what He expected from people. To them, God was prone to anger and could only be appeased through following the rules of the Law. Jesus demonstrated God's love, teaching people what it looked like to follow God out of love rather than duty and obligation.
- How exactly does light fill a room?
 - This is a question that's probably going to be met with a few seconds of silence. They might attempt to give a scientific explanation, but that's not necessarily what we're looking for here. The best answer is probably the one that someone might offer flippantly: “It just does.” Light doesn't do any complicated work to illuminate a room. By its very nature, light does its job. As long as light isn't being obscured, it brightens its surroundings.
- How is light a perfect analogy for Christians' role in the world?
 - In keeping with the last question, Christians provide light by simply being in the world loving God. When people see their character and lives on display, it draws others toward the gospel.
 - It's also interesting to note that when you have multiple candles in a room, we still experience it as one light. We're not drawing attention to ourselves or the light we give off. We are simply adding to the light of Jesus' witness in the world. The more of us truly following and loving God, the brighter the light that's given off.
- What are some ways that we keep our light hidden?
 - This question presents an opportunity for the group to be vulnerable and to think intentionally about areas they might seek to grow.

03

Passage: [Matthew 7:21–27](#),
[Luke 6:47–49](#)

Audience: A great crowd

Context: The sermon on
the mount

Key verse: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matthew 7:24).



The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders

Hearing Jesus’ words and putting them into practice is like building your home on a solid and trustworthy foundation that can withstand life’s storms. Jesus contrasts that to the dangers of ignoring His words, which He compares to building one’s life on sand.

This would have been a shocking statement to people listening to Christ’s sermon because they believed the Torah was the most reliable foundation to build one’s life upon.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“What Is the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders About?”](#)

Small group questions

- Jesus came into the world prophesying and doing many miracles. It’s because of these miracles that many believed and followed Him as the Messiah. Yet, He tells them that these things aren’t necessarily proof that someone truly knows God. What do you think was going through people’s minds when they heard this?
- The example Jesus gives of religious behaviors that won’t get you into the kingdom (prophecy, casting out demons, assorted miracles) are legitimate miraculous things that people can’t do on their own. Why aren’t those things proof that our hearts belong to the Lord?
 - God can do miraculous things through anyone or anything. In the Old Testament, Balaam’s donkey speaks to the prophet. When the people are screaming their praise to Jesus upon His entry into Jerusalem, He tells them that if these people are suppressed, the rocks will cry out. The fact that God may use us or has used us in the past isn’t necessarily a symbol of our right relationship with Him.
- What is the sign that Jesus gives that we are true followers?
 - Our obedience to the things Jesus asks of us.
- We often get caught up in trying to discern God’s will for our lives, but what can we learn about God’s will for us from this parable?
 - The kinds of questions we want answers for, like “who should I marry?” or “what kind of career should I have?” are important, but the foundation is always “What did Jesus ask of us?” Only by building our lives upon that foundation can we be sure we’re following God’s will for us.
- Jesus wrapped up the Sermon on the Mount with this parable. To His listeners, He was reinforcing the importance of everything He had just communicated to them. In what ways is this an even more critical warning for us today?
 - We have a record of Jesus’ words. Most of us probably have more than one Bible in our home and have sat through many studies and sermons. Our exposure to Jesus’ words is so regular and consistent that it would be a travesty if we didn’t put them into practice.

04

Passage: [Matthew 13:3–23](#),
[Mark 4:3–20](#), [Luke 8:5–15](#)

Audience: Large crowd

Context: Jesus teaching
beside a lake

Key verse: “But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown” (Matthew 13:23).

The Parable of the Sower

In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus uses the image of various kinds of soil to contrast different heart responses to the gospel:

- **The path:** Hard ground where the enemy snatches away the seed of the gospel before it has a chance to take root.
- **Rocky places:** Soil that is too shallow for the root of faith to survive.
- **Thorns:** Soil where there are too many allegiances competing for space.
- **Good soil:** Ground where the gospel can take root, flourish and reproduce.

Jesus’ point in this parable is that how we receive the gospel is primarily determined by the condition of our heart.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“What Is the Parable of the Sower About?”](#)

Small group questions

- First-century farmers carried a pack on their hip full of seed. When planting a field, they’d dip their hand in the pack and scatter a lot of seed, knowing that the birds would come and devour a lot of it. How does that apply to the gospel?
 - As Jesus said, the evil one comes and snatches up as much seed as he can before it takes root. When it comes to evangelism, we’re not strategically sharing the gospel in a couple of places we think it’s most likely to take root. We’re liberally spreading it everywhere knowing that only a small percentage of it will. But the seed that bears fruit becomes the source of next year’s crop of seeds!
- It’s easy to assume that a positive reaction to the gospel or even an acceptance of it is a sign that the transformation is complete. But in the case of the rocky soil, the plant is unable to develop the root system necessary to keep it alive when conditions are less than ideal. How does this reinforce the importance of discipleship?
- You can chase away birds and spread enough seed for some plants to take root. You can remove rocks and turn the soil to soften it. But farmers are in a continual war against thorns and weeds coming in and choking off the life of plants. They don’t weed once; they must constantly weed to keep plants healthy. How do you experience this regular battle in your own life?
- In what ways do you need to get busy growing? And in what ways do you need to get busy sowing?

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05

Passage: [Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43](#)

Audience: Large crowd

Context: Jesus teaching beside a lake

Key verse: “No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn” (Matthew 13:29–30).



The Parable of the Weeds

Darnel is a weed that mimics wheat. In its younger stages, it’s virtually indistinguishable from this vital crop. As it grows, its roots intertwine with the wheat and make it difficult to uproot without losing the grain, too. If a farmer wanted to sabotage his rival, he would come and sow darnel in another’s field.

Jesus uses this word picture to communicate the dangers of judging whether someone else is a member of God’s kingdom. At the end of the age, it will be God who sorts out the weeds from the wheat.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“What is the Meaning of the Parable of the Weeds?”](#)

Small group questions

- What do you think Jesus is warning against in this parable?
 - He doesn’t seem concerned that fake wheat will be left in the field. His concern is that real wheat may be pulled up and thrown out when trying to uproot the counterfeit.
- In this parable, the farmer is sowing real seed and his adversary is sowing counterfeit seed. The farmer doesn’t want the good pulled out with the bad. Why are we, the servants, unhelpful sorters of the good from the bad?
 - We cannot always tell the two apart.
- In what ways do you think we can damage the actual wheat when trying to pull out the counterfeit?
- Have you ever felt like someone was challenging whether you were an actual Christian or a counterfeit?
- If Jesus doesn’t want us to pull out the plant in trying to get rid of the wheat, how does that translate into the way we interact and love one another?
 - We can be intentional to give the benefit of the doubt and encourage growth and discipleship. The goal here isn’t to be nice, superficial Christians. It’s to withhold judgment and allow the harvesters to make that call. People who seem sincere might not be—and vice versa. Ultimately it’s God who knows a person’s heart.

06

Passage: [Matthew 13:31–32](#), [Mark 4:30–32](#), [Luke 13:18–19](#)

Audience: Large crowd

Context: Jesus teaching beside a lake

Key verse: “Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches” (Matthew 13:32).

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

The kingdom of God would come from humble beginnings and change the world. The Church began as a tiny group in Jerusalem, but expanded rapidly throughout the world. Today, Jesus’ influence is everywhere—even our calendar is organized around Jesus’ coming. Jesus prophesied that this would be the case when he contrasted the kingdom of God with a mustard seed that starts small and grows into a tree capable of providing shelter.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“How Is the Kingdom of God Like a Mustard Seed?”](#)

Small group questions

- Read both Matthew’s and Luke’s version of this parable (Matthew 13 and Luke 13). What are some differences in how these authors documented this parable? Where do you think each put the emphasis?
- Why do you think Luke, who was probably not Jewish, puts the focus on the birds who get to come sit in the tree’s branches?
 - The gospel extended the walls of God’s kingdom beyond the walls of Jerusalem. No longer was it a message unique to Israelites. Everyone was welcome ... including Luke.
- In what ways was this parable also a prophecy? What did it reveal about the rise of Christianity?
 - Through this one seed (Jesus), a movement was planted. We see it really taking root in the Book of Acts. Even despite attempts to stamp it out, it is now the world’s largest religious movement.
- How can we use the truth of this parable to build our faith?
 - Despite so many powerful forces seeking to wipe it out from the beginning, something so culturally significant and powerful grew from such an inauspicious origin. God can do so much with so little.



07

Passage: [Matthew 13:33](#),
[Luke 13:20–21](#)

Audience: Large crowd

Context: Jesus teaching
beside a lake

Key verse: “He told them still another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.’” (Matthew 13:33).

The Parable of the Leaven

In the Parable of the Mustard Seed, Jesus explains that the kingdom of God would start small and grow immensely. In the Parable of the Leaven, He describes how that will happen. Like yeast working its way through the dough, the kingdom of God would flourish as it worked its way through cultures by traveling from individual to individual.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“What Is the Parable of the Leaven About?”](#)

Leaven was a small portion of dough saved from the last time bread was made. This dough would be left to ferment before being added to the next batch of bread, causing it to rise.

Small group questions

- Jesus uses the example of leaven in different ways. Here it’s used in a positive way, but elsewhere He uses it to talk about avoiding “the leaven of the Pharisees” (Matthew 16:6). What does leaven represent?
 - In Jesus’ vernacular, leaven is something small that dramatically changes the characteristics of its surroundings over time.
- How is this parable similar to the Parable of the Mustard Seed?
 - Both talk about the small and humble origins of the kingdom—but that kingdom has a remarkable impact.
- The work yeast does in dough happens quietly. You put the dough away and it slowly rises on its own. How is that similar to the way the kingdom of God grows?
- Leaven needs to be added to dough to make it rise. In the same way, Jesus’ life, death and resurrection leavened the kingdom of God and made its productive nature possible. How can we make sure we’re leaning on the supernatural leaven of the Spirit in our ministries and lives?



08

Passage: [Matthew 13:44–46](#)

Audience: The disciples

Context: “Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him ...”
(Matthew 13:36)

Key verse: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it”
(Matthew 13:44–46).



The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl

These two parables share the same point. They express the value of God’s kingdom by illustrating what we should be willing to give up to acquire it—everything.

For a closer look at these parables, check out the post [“What Are the Parables of the Hidden Treasure and Pearl About?”](#)

Small group questions

- In both parables, the protagonists recognize the treasure they have found and are willing to trade everything they own to possess it. What makes the kingdom of God so valuable?
- We sometimes think about the sacrifices required of the gospel as simply giving up bad things in order to have the best thing. But in these parables, the people recognized the value of their treasure and were willing to sacrifice everything for it—not just the bad things. What kind of sacrifices are modern people asked to make in order to possess more of the kingdom’s influence in their lives?
- Jesus gave this parable to the disciples. Why do you think it was important for them to hear, and in what ways would it have been encouraging throughout their lives?
 - If anyone needed this lesson, it was Jesus’ disciples. Apart from Judas, they would all suffer horribly for the gospel and most of them would eventually pay the ultimate price. During their most difficult moments, these two parables could have provided some comfort and helped fix their eyes on the eternal.
- Do you have a story about something that was hard to sacrifice for the kingdom or something you’re still struggling to give up?

09

Passage: [Matthew 13:47–50](#)

Audience: The disciples

Context: “Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him ...”
(Matthew 13:36)

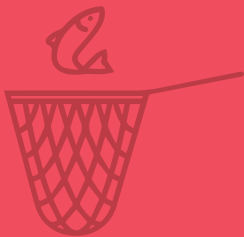
Key verse: “When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away”
(Matthew 13:48).

The Parable of the Net

The Parable of the Net is similar to the Parable of the Weeds. It has to do with the coming judgment at the end of the age. As the gospel is spread throughout the world, it attracts all sorts of people—some who are willing to take it seriously and others who are merely drawn to elements of the message. But a time is coming when the real disciples will be separated from the false ones, in the same way that fishermen would separate edible from inedible fish.

Small group questions

- To really grasp the point of this parable, we need to consider the audience. Jesus specifically shared this lesson with the disciples. How do you think that might help us zero in on what Jesus wants us to understand here?
 - The disciples were fishermen called to become fishers of people. They were going to spend their lives casting their nets for the kingdom. The point here isn’t necessarily about the final destination of the fish, it’s about the fact that the disciples need to cast their nets far and wide and pull up as many fish as possible. The sorting comes later.
- Are there ways the church might look different if we focused more on gathering as many fish as possible and less on sorting them right now?
- What do you think it looks like for churches and ministries to cast a wide net and gather as many fish as possible?



10

Passage: Matthew 13:52

Audience: The disciples

Context: “Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him ... ”

(Matthew 13:36)

Key verse: “He said to them, ‘Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old’” (Matthew 13:52).

The Parable of the Homeowner

Throughout the Old Testament, we see foreshadowings of Jesus’ ministry. Teachers of the law who chose to follow Jesus played a valuable role in the early church, helping to illuminate the connection between the teachings and prophecies of the Old Testament and Christ’s new covenant.

Small group questions

- There were plenty of teachers of the Law who would never become disciples of the kingdom that Jesus inaugurated. What did that mean about their understanding of the Jewish Scriptures?
 - They were able to pull a lot of treasure out of the Old Testament, but because they didn’t recognize the new treasures, they couldn’t completely value or understand all the treasure that’s available. For teachers of the Law who understood the kingdom, the Hebrew Scriptures were illuminated in new ways.
- In what ways is your understanding of the Old Testament informed by your understanding of the New Testament?
- What are some things in the Old Testament that you read differently in light of Jesus?



11

Passage: [Matthew 18:12-14](#)

Audience: The disciples

Context: The disciples asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” Jesus responded by teaching them about the importance of children. He then told them this parable.

Key verse: “In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish” (Matthew 18:14)

The Parable of the Wandering Sheep

While this parable is similar to the Parable of the Lost Sheep in Luke, Jesus is talking to the disciples and not the Pharisees here. By singling out children, He also places focus on caring for the vulnerable.

His point seems to be that those who would be passed over because of their lack of earthly significance and contribution are great in the kingdom of heaven. This ties in perfectly with Jesus’ consistent message of a great reversal, where the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Jesus reiterates God’s care for the wayward and vulnerable by comparing Himself to a shepherd who would leave 99 sheep in order to track down one who has gone astray.

When the disciples ask the Lord who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven, the answer is clear. The greatest are those who understand that ranking people by worth is a reflection of worldly values.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“What Is the Parable of the Wandering Sheep About?”](#)

Small group questions

- Read Matthew 18:1-5: Throughout the Gospels, the disciples are constantly jockeying for position and trying to figure out who’s more important. In what ways do we make the Christian life about prominence and position?
- Why do you think that Jesus called a child over to Him to communicate what it meant to enter the kingdom of heaven?
 - People often interpret this in different ways. Maybe it’s because little children have an easier time with faith? Maybe it’s their sense of wonder and love? Remember this is in response to the disciple’s question about who is greater. Jesus called over someone with fewest rights and lowest prominence. Children couldn’t advocate for themselves. They couldn’t demand their way. They couldn’t hold power. We enter the kingdom of God by laying aside our lust for position and importance.
- Read Matthew 18:6-9: In light of the discussion Jesus is having with the disciples, what is He trying to say in the “woe to those who cause them to stumble” portion?
 - This section is often pulled out of context and read simply as Jesus’ words against hurting or misguiding children. That’s definitely part of this admonition. But Jesus is still answering the disciples’ question about the kingdom of God.
- He’s reminding them that we enter the kingdom like children, without our own power and rights. Within the kingdom, we are under God’s care. He is watching over us and bringing those who abuse kingdom people to account.
- No matter who we are, how prominent we are, how much of a sinner we are, we all enter the kingdom of God at the same place. How is this encouraging to you?
- In the Parable of the Wandering Sheep, Jesus communicates that He is always on the hunt for the lost, vulnerable sheep. Common wisdom might say, “Let that one sheep go so you don’t leave the 99 vulnerable.” But in Jesus’ economy, one lost sheep is not less valuable than 99 found sheep. How can we reflect this truth in our own walks with God?



12

Passage: [Matthew 18:23–31](#)

Audience: The disciples

Context: Peter asked Jesus how many times we must forgive someone who sins against us.

Key verse: “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded” (Matthew 18:28).



The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

Jesus illustrates the importance of forgiveness by telling the story of a king who forgives a servant of a debt he’s utterly incapable of repaying. After receiving this incredible mercy, the servant assaults a fellow servant who owes him a small debt. The king is angered that the servant refused to extend the mercy he so freely received.

Through this parable, Jesus tells Peter (and us) that we should see the sins committed against us in the light of the sins God has forgiven us for. As we have been forgiven, we should also forgive.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“What Is the Meaning of the Parable about the Unmerciful Servant?”](#)

Small group questions

- Peter asked the Lord, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” That had to feel like an excessive amount to Peter. Does Jesus congratulate him on that indulgent number? How come?
- In Jesus’ parable, the servant owed a debt he’d never be able to repay, so the king was going to sell all the servant’s belongings and family members to recoup some of the loss. What changes the king’s mind?
- Why did the servant’s actions infuriate the king?
 - In the servant’s mind, his mammoth debt to the king was forgivable, but his peer’s much smaller debt was not. Without realizing it, the servant was elevating himself above the king.
- How are we often guilty of the same behavior of the servant?
 - We have been forgiven so much and continue to hold everyone around us accountable for every time they wrong us. As receivers of prodigious mercy, we’re to be dispensers of enormous grace.
- How can we become more forgiving people?

13

Passage: [Matthew 20:1–16](#)

Audience: Crowds in Judea

Context: Jesus teaching

Key verse: “So the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matthew 20:16).

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

The Parable of the Workers tells the story of a landowner who hires four sets of laborers throughout the course of the day. When the work day is over, all the workers received the same wages. Those who were hired at the beginning of the day were angered that those who were hired late in the day received a full day’s pay.

The landowner points out that the early workers were fairly compensated and they’re jealous at the generosity the landowner showed the latecomers.

Israel was like the workers hired early in the morning. They had received God’s laws and teachings from the beginning. Jesus was responding to the natural resentment that would come when God’s kingdom would be opened to those from every nation.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“What Is the Parable of the Vineyard Workers About?”](#)

Small group questions

- When was the last time you felt like someone was given benefits you felt they hadn’t earned?
- The Jews were always God’s people and that relationship came with promises. The idea that Gentiles might be able to come into the kingdom of God with the same relationship and rights must have been hard on them. How does this parable speak to that frustration?
- The first workers weren’t upset with the deal they struck with the landowner until they felt someone hired later was getting as much as them. Why does our perspective change so much when we start comparing ourselves to everyone around us?
- How would our lives change if we focused more on God’s incredible mercy instead of whether others are getting more than they deserve?
- How can we be better about rejoicing at God’s goodness to others than whether everything is coming out “fair?”

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14

Passage: [Matthew 21:28–32](#)

Audience: Large crowd outside the temple

Context: The chief priests have questioned Jesus’s authority

Key verse: “For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him” (Matthew 21:32).

The Parable of the Two Sons

In this parable, Jesus compares the obedience of the Pharisees and teachers of the law to those of the sinners following Jesus. Despite the outward expressions of compliance, the Pharisees never got around to obeying God. By comparison, the sinners in Christ’s circle disobeyed God but had a change of heart.

In the end, they were justified by their actual obedience and not just promising to be obedient.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“What Is the Meaning of the Parable of the Two Sons?”](#)

Small group questions

- In your own words, how would you paraphrase this parable?
- Is a child obedient the moment they agree to do what you ask?
 - In case there is any question, obedience occurs when you do the thing you were asked to do.
- Do you have experience with someone who wanted to be held accountable for their intentions more than their behavior?
- Jesus tells this parable after cursing a fig tree. The fig tree had a lot of leaves but no fruit. Generally, leaves are a sign that fruit is present. In what ways can we occasionally settle for the appearance of fruit rather than being generally fruitful?
- Is there something you have said “yes” to that God’s still waiting for you to do?



15

Passage: [Matthew 21:33–44](#), [Mark 12:1–11](#), [Luke 20:9–18](#)

Audience: Large crowd outside the temple

Context: The chief priests have questioned Jesus's authority

Key verse: “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit” (Matthew 21:43).

The Parable of the Tenants

Right after sharing the Parable of the Two Sons, Jesus tells another story about a landowner who rented his vineyard to some farmers. When harvest came, the landowner sent servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

The tenants abused the servants (and even killed some), so the landowner decided to send his own son, assuming respect that was denied the servants would be shown to his heir. The tenants wind up killing him, too.

The tenants in this story not only represent the chief priests and Pharisees but also the Israelites who had abused the prophets. Not only would they abuse God's servants, but they were strategizing a way to dispose of Jesus Himself.

This parable further explains why God's kingdom would make room for those from outside of Israel.

It was commonplace in the first century for a wealthy investor to buy property for a farm or vineyard and then leave it in the care of tenants. Come harvest, they'd send someone to collect their portion of the proceeds.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“What Is the Meaning of the Parable of the Tenants?”](#)

Small group questions

- Who do you think are the servants that the landowner sends to the tenants?
 - These are the prophets that God sent to correct Israel and keep her on the right track.
- If Jesus is represented in this parable, who represents Him?
 - The son of the landowner.
- Matthew tells us that the Pharisees and chief priests heard this parable and knew Jesus was talking about them. Why do you think that they didn't respond with repentance?
 - There are a lot of reasons that could be given here. It's important to note the fact that when people are around their peers, it takes a lot to get them to break away from the groupthink and actually reflect for themselves.
- How can we be sure we're open to divine correction?



16

Passage: [Matthew 22:1-14](#)

Audience: Large crowd outside the temple

Context: The chief priests have questioned Jesus's authority

Key verse: "Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come'" (Matthew 22:8).



The Parable of the Wedding Banquet

This parable is almost a combination of the Parable of the Tenants and the Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14:15-24). A king is throwing a wedding banquet, but after it's prepared, the guests who promised to attend provide excuses to bow out, and some actually kill the servants who showed up to collect them.

In response, the king dispatches an army on the murderous invitees, and then extends the invitation to anyone who would like to attend. As the king mingles with guests, he discovers a man who is not wearing the wedding garb that's been provided. The king ejects this man from the banquet.

Jesus is reiterating the point that Israel's religious leaders had disqualified themselves from the kingdom, so He was opening the kingdom up to the Gentiles. The twist at the end of the parable is that even the newly invited guests need to be attired in the garb of grace that will come through Jesus' death and resurrection.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post "[What Is the Parable of the Great Banquet About?](#)"

Small group questions

- Can you remember a time when you worked really hard on something and it wasn't appreciated by the person or people you did it for?
- Who are the original invited guests?
- What examples from Jesus' ministry exemplify the king's call to invite everyone to the wedding?
 - Spend some time talking about interactions and stories that demonstrate that Jesus' ministry was an invitation to those outside of Israel, but also outside of respectable first-century life.
 - This could include things like:
 - His interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4).
 - His healing of the centurion's servant (Luke 7:1-10).
- His response to the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11).
- Jesus' parable doesn't tell us about how those who received the original invitation reacted to less "worthy" people being invited to the event in their place. But judging from the Pharisees', Sadducees', and chief priests' responses to Jesus' ministry, what would you guess their response was: remorse or rage?
- What point do you think Jesus is trying to make with the guest who isn't dressed for the banquet?
 - There is no right answer here. (Even biblical scholars tend to disagree on this!) It's helpful to keep your eye on the point up until now. There were previous guests who have been disinvited. It could be that the works associated with keeping the Law is the attire that will no longer get you into the banquet.

17

Passage: [Matthew 25:1-13](#)

Audience: The disciples

Context: Jesus teaches the disciples about the end times

Key verse: “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour” (Matthew 25:13).

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

There's a lot of disagreement about the meaning of this parable. Its interpretation tends to be tied to the theological leanings of the individual interpreting it. At its most basic level though, it's simple to understand.

The parable is about 10 virgins who are waiting to accompany a bridegroom to the bride's home as part of a traditional procession. When it is announced that he's on his way, only five of them are prepared with extra oil for their lamps. The unprepared virgins attempt to get oil from the others, but knowing that they'll run out, the prepared virgins refuse. The foolish virgins run to purchase fuel, but they miss the bridegroom and are unable to attend the wedding feast.

Jesus is telling the disciples that His followers will be prepared for His coming. They're not going to be distracted and surprised when He comes.

Traditionally, the bride and her bridesmaids would wait at the bride's home for the groom to arrive. This usually occurred after dark, and there would be a long procession of dancing and celebration that led to the main event.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“What Is the Parable of the Ten Virgins About?”](#)

Small group questions

- This parable is one that many people interpret differently. What about this parable could contribute to its over-complication?
 - Let people respond with answers for as long as they want. See if anyone mentions the temptation there is to guess what the lamps, oil, etc. represent. If not, bring it up.
- What significance might different Christians or denominations give to the oil that would impact the point of the story?
 - Some believers might say that the oil represents the Holy Spirit. Others might say things like faith, righteous living, etc.
- Jesus doesn't feel the need to unpack what everything represents, but He does tell us what the point of the parable is. What does He say?
 - “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour” (Matthew 25:13).
- All ten virgins were planning on attending the wedding, but half of them were caught off guard and unprepared. In what ways can we find ourselves being unprepared?
- What would change in your life if you wanted to be more like the prepared virgins?



18

Passage: [Matthew 25:14–30](#), [Luke 19:12–27](#)

Audience: The disciples

Context: Jesus teaches the disciples about the end times

Key verse: “For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them” (Matthew 25:29).

The Parable of the Talents

The Parable of the Talents fits within the context of Jesus’ end-times discussion. It operates as a natural follow-up to the story about the 10 virgins.

This parable tells the story of a man going on a journey and entrusting three servants with varying amounts of money. When the master arrives to settle accounts with these servants, the two that he entrusted with the most significant amounts offer the master a return on his investment. The third servant simply hid the money he was given and gives it back to the master. The last servant is scolded and rejected for not turning any profit on the money he was entrusted with.

The immediate context points to this being a warning for Israel, but the application touches everyone who longs to be part of the kingdom. We are all responsible for stewarding the grace and resources we have received. They’re not just ours to hoard; they’re ours to multiply.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“What Is the Meaning of the Parable of the Talents?”](#)

Small group questions

- To really grasp the meaning behind parables, it’s important to focus on the main point. Jesus rarely uses a parable to communicate multiple ideas. He wanted His listeners to have a story they understood with an application that made sense to them. For some parables that are a little more involved, it’s easy to get into the weeds by focusing too much on all the details. What would you say that Jesus is trying to communicate here?
- The master is distributing money to his servants, but they’re only managing it. It’s still his money. How does this communicate the principle of stewardship?
 - As believers, we are all given resources according to our skills and abilities, but those resources ultimately belong to God. We will eventually answer for how we invest them.
- When the unfaithful steward can offer no return on the master’s investment, he blames it on his fear of the master. The master responds by basically saying, “If you really feared me, you would have invested this.” What kinds of behaviors do we try and justify with similar arguments?
- What would it look like to be true stewards of the resources and abilities that God has given us?
- Are there things in your life that God might be expecting a return on that you haven’t invested?



19

Passage: [Matthew 25:31–46](#)

Audience: The disciples

Context: Jesus teaches the disciples about the end times

Key verse: “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” (Matthew 25:40).



The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats

Jesus contrasts people who are separated at the end of days. In this parable, they’re divided based on the service they’ve provided to the vulnerable including the:

- Hungry
- Thirsty
- Stranger
- Naked
- Sick
- Imprisoned

To everyone’s complete surprise, Jesus so identifies with the vulnerable that he indicates that by serving them, they are actually serving Jesus Himself. Those who withheld care for the lowly are judged for withholding it from Jesus.

If this was the only teaching of Jesus one was to hear, it would be easy to assume that redemption is based entirely on what we did or did not do. The application here is that saving faith produces fruit, and true followers of Christ are servants.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“What’s the Parable of the Sheep and Goats about?”](#)

Small group questions

- Christianity places a huge emphasis on salvation by grace alone, and rightly so. We’re not accepted because of what we bring to our relationship with God, but by the work of the cross. But this parable seems to place all the emphasis on what we do or do not do. How do we reconcile that?
 - We need to be careful that we don’t downplay works to the point that it doesn’t matter what we do. If we have faith, our faith will produce fruit that protects and serves the poor, needy and marginalized.
- We often would like to imagine that if a crisis presented itself, we’d respond in caring and benevolent ways. But Jesus’ words seem to focus on people who proactively care for the needy. How does what we do intentionally demonstrate how we’d respond in a crisis?
 - We tell ourselves that we love and care for others, but often when an opportunity arises, it’s at an inconvenient time or requires some expertise we don’t possess, so we excuse ourselves from this particular situation—still convinced that we’re sheep and not goats. People whose faith is leading them to good, benevolent works are people who actively seek out opportunities to care for others.
- Do you think that throughout their lives the goats considered themselves people who didn’t care about serving others? What justifications might they offer for not caring for people?
 - This is an important question but has the potential to cause some tension. Many of the excuses these “goats” used are justifications that people in your group are familiar with too. Very few people think of themselves as selfish or uncaring, so we fool ourselves with all kinds of rationales:
 - People who are suffering are lazy and want handouts
 - If I give to them, they’ll squander it
 - They’re in this position because of their bad decisions
- Does Jesus’ list seem to indicate that it matters how each person got themselves into their predicament? How should that impact the way we interact with the world?
 - Take the prisoner as an example. Jesus doesn’t indicate one way or another whether they were guilty of whatever crime got them imprisoned.
- The way this parable is presented, Jesus is reminding His listeners the importance of caring for others. He’s reminding them to make the choice to do so. How can we get better at choosing the posture of a sheep instead of a goat?

20

Passage: [Mark 4:26–29](#)

Audience: Large crowd

Context: Jesus teaching beside a lake

Key verse: “All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head” (Mark 4:28).

The Parable of the Growing Seed

As Israel awaited its Messiah, it looked forward to a kingdom that would burst upon the scene and restore God’s rule. In much the same way as He does in the parable of the leaven, Jesus says that will not be the case. The kingdom will grow almost inconspicuously in the midst of the world’s kingdoms.

Small group questions

- How does this parable demonstrate the inauguration and growth of Christianity?
 - Jesus came into the world as the seed. With His death, the seed split open and sprouted. All of this was happening while people largely went on with their everyday lives. Soon this new movement spread around Jerusalem and into the whole world.
- What does this parable say about what truly matters in our lives and ministries?
 - The world loves the big and sensational. But the kingdom is growing through the quiet consistent faithfulness of people and ministries.
- In a world so focused on what’s big, popular, and thrilling, why is quiet faithfulness so revolutionary?
- How can we follow Jesus better without being attracted to the sensational or attempting to draw attention to ourselves?



21

Passage: [Mark 13:34–37](#)

Audience: The disciples

Context: Jesus teaching the disciples about the end times

Key verse: “What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’” (Mark 13:37)

The Parable of the Returning Owner

This simple parable teaches a similar lesson as the Parable of the 10 Virgins and occurs during the same teaching of the end times. Jesus compares the coming of the kingdom to a master leaving his servants in charge of their responsibilities while he is away. They should be busy and watchful because they do not know when their master will return.

The servants should be careful not to slip into a mindset that says, “The master has been gone so long, what are the chances he’s going to show up today? We can worry about preparing for his return later.”

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“What’s the Parable of the Returning Owner About?”](#)

Small group questions

- What does Jesus want his listeners to get out of this parable?
- What do you think it looks like for Christians to be “caught sleeping” when they should have been vigilant?
- How can we encourage one another to be on guard for the Lord’s return?
- What would be different if we truly believed that the Lord could return at any time?



22

Passage: [Luke 7:41–43](#)

Audience: Those present at a Pharisee's dinner party

Context: A sinful woman anoints Jesus's feet at a dinner party. The host (a Pharisee) mutters to himself that Jesus can't be a prophet because He's allowing this sinful woman to touch Him.

Key verse: "Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" (Luke 7:42)



The Parable of the Moneylender

In response to the Pharisee's judgment upon the sinful woman, Jesus offers up a brief story about multiple debtors. Each one owed a dramatically different amount, but the moneylender forgave all their debts.

He asked the Pharisee which one of the debtors would love the lender most? The Pharisee responds that the person who was forgiven the greater debt would love the most. Jesus confirms that this is the right answer, His point being that this sinful woman (and others like her) would love God more because of the mercy they've been shown.

A denarius was about the daily wage for a laborer. One debtor owed almost two years' salary, while the other person owed fewer than two months' wages. Both would be thankful to have their debts forgiven, but their appreciation wouldn't be the same.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post ["What Is the Meaning of the Moneylender Parable?"](#)

Small group questions

- How would you express Jesus' point in your own words?
- How does our self-reliance lead us to a place where we're not as humble and grateful as we should be?
- How can humility lead us to living more vibrant, grace-filled lives?
- The idea of mercy and love is present in the Old Testament. What is it about the way the Pharisees saw their faith that made grace so hard for them to extend to others?
- What kinds of things can we do to be more grace-filled and thankful?

23

Passage: [Luke 12:16–21](#)

Audience: The disciples within earshot of a larger crowd

Context: A man asked Jesus to intervene in a disagreement about an inheritance

Key verse: “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’” (Luke 12:20)

The Parable of the Rich Fool

A man comes to Jesus to mediate a disagreement with his brother about an inheritance. Jesus rebukes the man and warns him to be on guard against greed.

He then tells the story of a wealthy man who used his farming profits to build bigger barns and store up grain that would serve him in his old age. That way, when he was older, he could relax and not struggle to meet his own needs. Unfortunately, he didn’t realize that he was going to die and the surplus of goods he had saved would just be passed on to someone else.

By worldly standards, the rich man didn’t make a foolish decision. In light of eternity, however, he had neglected to make himself rich in the things that mattered to God—and would ultimately serve him for eternity.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post [“What’s the Meaning of the Parable of the Rich Fool?”](#)

Small group questions

- What do you think Jesus is trying to communicate here?
- Read 2 Corinthians 9:11: How does this verse help illuminate the point of this parable?
 - It reinforces the idea that God doesn’t just bless us to enrich us. He also blesses us so we can be more productive for the kingdom.
- What do you think the man in this parable did wrong?
 - Really press in with this question: Is there something wrong with expanding your business? It appears that this man’s biggest sin was living as if he should only consider himself when it comes to responding to blessing.
- How can we be better about not falling into this same trap?



24

Passage: [Luke 12:42–48](#)

Audience: The disciples within earshot of a larger crowd

Context: In response to the Parable of the Watchful Servants, Peter asks Jesus if He is speaking to the disciples or the gathered crowd.

Key verse: “It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns” (Luke 12:43).



The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Servants

Peter wants to know who Jesus is instructing to be watchful. Is He just speaking to the disciples or is He instructing everyone? Jesus responds with another parable.

A master puts a manager in charge of his servants while he is away. It's the manager's duty to ensure that the servants are fed and paid on time. But what would happen if that manager took advantage of his freedom and responsibility? What if he figured the master wouldn't return soon, so he became self-indulgent and abusive? The master would show up unannounced and put that manager to death.

Jesus is addressing the disciples who would be put in positions of authority in His household, but He is also addressing everyone else who finds themselves in positions of authority within the church. Be vigilant and make sure you are at your Master's business when He returns.

Small group questions

- Do you have an example of someone who abused a position of authority?
- Jesus gives the example of someone put in a position of authority. What are some other examples of people who could fall under the umbrella of “who has been given much, much will be demanded.”
 - A natural answer might be someone with lots of material possessions. What about people with large social media platforms? Most Americans might not think of themselves as particularly blessed, but many around the world would be envious of their wealth and opportunities. Does the verse “who has been given much, much will be demanded?” apply here?
- How should the fact that Jesus expects more of leaders be factored into what we expect from them?
- We often aspire to positions of leadership and prominence because of what it brings us: more money, attention, authority, etc. What can we do to ensure our motivations are pure?

25

Passage: [Luke 13:6–9](#)

Audience: The disciples within earshot of a larger crowd

Context: Some in the crowd tell Jesus of a tragedy which had befallen some Galileans. Jesus challenges the idea that they suffered as judgment. He then calls the whole crowd to repent with this parable.

Key verse: “If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down” (Luke 13:9).

The Parable of the Unfruitful Fig Tree

A man is tired of the fruit tree growing in his vineyard not producing fruit. He tells the caretaker to cut it down. The caretaker asks for an opportunity to make it fruitful. The vineyard owner concedes but gives him one year to make it fruitful. If it doesn't produce fruit next year, it is to be discarded.

Jesus expects fruit from His followers, but like the fig tree, we don't know when our time is up. We cannot wait forever to begin producing fruit.

Small group questions

- What are some biblical passages you can think of that reinforce the importance of fruit?
 - Some examples could include Matthew 3:8, Galatians 5:22–26, John 15:16
- How can we know that we're producing fruit?
 - We can't always be the best judge for good or bad. We need an honest community around us.
- What should we do if we're not producing fruit?
- How can we encourage fruit from others?



26

Passage: [Luke 17:7–10](#)

Audience: The disciples

Context: Jesus is telling His disciples what He expects of them

Key verse: “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’” (Luke 17:10).

The Parable of the Master and the Servant

To remind the disciples about how the kingdom’s chain of command works, Jesus asks them to imagine a scenario where a servant has come inside from a day of fulfilling his responsibilities. The master doesn’t then wait on the servant. Instead, the servant serves the master and waits patiently before he eats. This is the servant’s duty.

Jesus doesn’t tell this story dismissively, as if the disciples are just slaves. Instead, He wants the disciples to understand that they have been brought into God’s kingdom out of kindness. God owes them nothing, and they owe Him everything.

Small group questions

- Jesus reminded the disciples often that “no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent ‘him’” (John 13:16). How is this parable an expression of this truth?
- Despite what we say, how do we behave in ways that communicate that the servant is greater than the master?
- Jesus’ last statement is kind of alarming, “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’” In what ways do we act as if we’re expecting God to be grateful we’re on His team?
- What can we do to encourage one another to be dutiful and grateful servants of our Master?



27

Passage: [Luke 10:30–37](#)

Audience: A teacher of the law (and likely the disciples)

Context: A lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Once it's established that the whole of the law is summed up in loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself, the lawyer tries to wriggle out of the responsibility to love his neighbor by asking, "Who is my neighbor?"

Key verse: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:36–37).



The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Jesus shocks the lawyer with a parable about a man who is robbed, beaten and left for dead. A priest and Levite (servant to priests) come by but do not stop to help the man. But then a Samaritan comes along who tends to the man and pays to put him up in an inn until he recovers.

We miss the shocking nature of this parable because we don't understand just how much Jews hated Samaritans. This hatred went back hundreds of years. To admit that it was the Samaritan who was a true neighbor to this man and not a fellow Jew would have been hard for the lawyer.

The application is that everyone is capable of being our neighbor—and we are responsible for being a neighbor to everyone.

The Jews and Samaritans were mortal enemies. In fact, Samaritans were so hated that when traveling from Judea to Galilee, Jews went to great lengths to avoid Samaria entirely.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post ["What Is the Parable of the Good Samaritan About?"](#)

Small group questions

- How is this parable a response to the question, "Who is my neighbor?"
- Why do you think Jesus chose a Samaritan as the hero of this story and not the Pharisee or the priest?
- If Jesus told this story to religious people today, who might He choose in place of the Samaritan?
- What does it mean for us to love our neighbor?
- Where do we fall short in loving our neighbors?

28

Passage: [Luke 11:5–8](#)

Audience: The disciples

Context: One of the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. After teaching them the Lord's Prayer, He gives them this parable.

Key verse: "I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need" (Luke 11:8).

The Parable of the Friend Seeking Bread

Jesus wants His followers to have the courage to make bold requests and pray until God moves. To illustrate this, He gives a parable about a man whose friend shows up in the middle of the night, but he doesn't have any food to offer him. So, this man goes to another friend and wakes him up to borrow some bread. It's incredibly inconvenient to help, but the third friend ends up responding because of the tenacity of the request.

Jesus isn't comparing God and the sleeping friend. He's actually contrasting them. If a friend is moved enough by your audacity to act on your behalf, how much more is God who loves you?

Radical hospitality was expected from first-century people in the Near East. It would be a major break in social protocol not to be able to provide a meal for a visitor.

Small group questions

- This is a good example of the way Jesus' parables work. Here Jesus is trying to teach a valuable lesson. If we read into it too much, it's easy to get the idea that God is the sleeping friend who doesn't want to be inconvenienced by our requests. But that's not the case. Jesus is trying to make a point. What do you think it is?
 - The focus here is on the audacity of the request and not the hesitance of the friend. Jesus is encouraging His followers not to be afraid to speak up and advocate for themselves and others.
- The parable's main character isn't trying to help someone in dire straits or in a legitimate crisis. He's imposing on his friend to save himself from embarrassment. Is that the kind of thing you would be comfortable praying about?
- Why do people assume that one can only ask for extremely urgent issues of the utmost importance and not everyday problems that we all face?
- What would change about your prayer life if you believed God wanted you to pray like this?
- What's something that comes to mind that you have avoided asking God about or for?



29

Passage: [Luke 14:7-11](#)

Audience: Guests at a Pharisee's dinner party

Context: Jesus is watching these guests choosing the best seats

Key verse: "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11).



The Parable of the Place of Honor

It's almost comical how pointed this parable is. Jesus was invited to dine at the home of a Pharisee, and He was watching guests arrive and jockey for the best positions. He responds with a parable that would have been taken as a very specific criticism.

He tells them that at a wedding party you should never choose the place of honor. That way if someone more distinguished arrives, the host won't have to ask you to move and humiliate you. Instead, take the lowest place. That way, when you're asked to move up, you will be honored.

The more significant application had to do with the Pharisees' perceived prominence in God's kingdom. Jesus often warned that a great reversal was coming where the first would be last. He was encouraging them to prepare for that day.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post ["What Is the Parable of Honor About?"](#)

In first-century gatherings, meals were served to guests reclining around a table in a U shape. The host would sit at the base of the U, and the most prominent guests would sit on either side. Less notable guests would be seated farther away from the host.

Small group questions

- Who is the most humble person you know, and what makes you see them that way?
- Jesus is warning His hosts against putting themselves in positions of importance and authority. Can you think of ways we do that today? Are there examples of ways that we seek positions of importance in the church?
- How would social situations change if people weren't always jockeying for positions of prestige and honor?
- Can you think of ways that we do the same thing when we talk about ourselves and our accomplishments?
 - We all struggle with a tendency to make ourselves the hero of every story and talk about ourselves in ways intended to impress others and make us seem like the most interesting person in the room.
- Scripture regularly encourages us to humble ourselves. How can we do that? Is there a temptation to turn our humility into a source of pride, too?

30

Passage: [Luke 14:16-24](#)

Audience: Guests at a Pharisee's dinner party

Context: In response to the Parable of the Place of Honor, someone responded, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."

Key verse: "I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet" (Luke 14:24).



The Parable of the Great Banquet

After sharing the Parable of the Place of Honor, a man responds with a toast to those who are blessed enough to eat at the feast of the kingdom of God. It's almost as if he completely missed the point of Christ's words. So Jesus tells a more challenging parable.

A man was putting on a banquet and invited many guests. When he sent his servants to collect the people who promised to attend, they offered excuses for why they couldn't come. When the master heard that the guests had blown off his event, he sent his servant out to invite those on the bottom of society's ladder: the poor, lame, blind, etc. He then sent the servant out to invite travelers to come to the party.

Jesus was trying to tell them that He was here to collect them for God's celebration, but they were refusing Him. In their stead, He was going to fill the kingdom with people the Pharisees didn't think belonged.

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post ["What Is the Parable of the Great Banquet About?"](#)

In the first century, someone throwing a feast would send out invitations for an RSVP. When the meal was ready, the host would send a servant around to collect the guests. It would be considered a great insult to turn down the meal after it is prepared.

Small group questions

- The invited guests were all too preoccupied with their own agendas and issues to fulfill their obligation to attend the feast. What kind of bind did that put the man who was throwing the banquet in?
 - He had spent a great deal of time and expense putting this banquet together. Now he would be stuck with all this food.
- Jesus offers this parable in response to one of the guests at this Pharisee luncheon. The guest has responded to Jesus' previous parable (the Parable of the Place of Honor) by saying, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." Why do you think Jesus would respond with this parable?
 - The whole religious structure at the time was fairly disengaged and disconnected from God's will and heart. They were so focused on their own agendas that they wouldn't even recognize the invitation if it came—and as we can see from the gospel, would respond pretty hostile toward it.
- Why do you think the outsiders are more open to coming to the banquet than the original invitees?
- How do you think the Pharisees felt upon hearing this parable (particularly the last line)?
- How can we ensure that we don't have hard hearts that make us oblivious to what God is doing?

31

Passage: [Luke 14:28–33](#)

Audience: A large crowd

Context: People speaking to the crowds who were following Him

Key verse: “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?” (Luke 14:28)

Parables about Counting the Cost

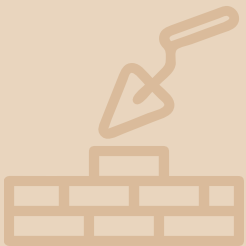
Jesus never seemed interested in attracting a crowd for its own sake. He knew that people were drawn to Him because of His miracles and celebrity. He always challenged their motives. Here Luke tells us that Jesus randomly turns to the crowd that’s following after Him and starts talking about the cost of discipleship.

He tells them, “Imagine wanting to build a tower. Wouldn’t you count the cost before you started so that you don’t have to abandon the project halfway through? Or consider a king about to go to war. Doesn’t he ponder the size of his army, and if he knows he can’t win, doesn’t he look to strike a deal?”

He’s telling them to seriously consider the cost associated with following Him.

Small group questions

- Can you remember a time when you were caught off guard because you didn’t think through an expense? What did you do?
- Jesus gives two examples of situations where you would be smart to consider your resources before you commit. How does this apply to Christianity?
- Do you think we do a good job of communicating this principle when sharing the gospel? Do we adequately discuss the costs of following Jesus, or are we more focused on communicating the benefits?
- What are some costs that someone should consider when deciding to follow Jesus?



32

Passage: [Luke 15:3–10](#)

Audience: A large crowd (including tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and teachers of the law)

Context: As Jesus speaks to the crowd, the Pharisees begin grumbling about the low moral quality of the people Jesus associated with

Key verse: “I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (Luke 15:7).



The Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

When Jesus overhears Pharisees disparaging Him for associating with sinners, He begins instructing them about God’s passion for the lost. In God’s economy, a shepherd leaves his flock to find a single lost sheep—and upon finding it, he rejoices.

After the Parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus offers another parable intended to communicate the same truth. God is like a woman who loses one of her 10 silver coins, and she overturns the house until she finds it. Once she does, she calls all her friends to celebrate the recovery of this coin.

Small group questions

- Luke prefaces this parable this way: “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them’ (Luke 15:1-2). How are these parables a response to the Pharisees’ words?
- What was wrong with the Pharisees’ perspective?
 - To the Pharisee, the Law was protection from impurity. Your holiness depended upon not being debased by unclean items and impure people. By simply associating with the impure, Jesus was making Himself impure.
- In what ways have you seen the same kinds of perspectives shared by religious people today?
- In light of these parables, what is God’s perspective about sinners?
- How can we develop a point of view that’s more like Jesus and less like the Pharisees?

33

Passage: [Luke 15:11–32](#)

Audience: A large crowd (including tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and teachers of the law)

Context: As Jesus speaks to the crowd, the Pharisees begin grumbling about the low moral quality of the people Jesus associated with.

Key verse: “My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours’” (Luke 15:31).

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Jesus rounds out the trifecta of parables about lost things with a story of a wayward son. While this parable is famously known as the story of the prodigal son, it’s really a parable about the older brother.

In this parable, a son asks his dad to give him his inheritance early. The father does, and the son leaves home. It doesn’t take too long before his entire portion of the estate is squandered, and at that point, the country is hit with a famine. The son ends up tending to pigs and finds himself longing to eat what the pigs have.

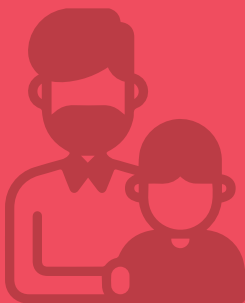
He decides to go home, and as he nears the home of his youth, his father runs out to meet him. He apologizes to his father, and his father—so happy to have him home—lavishes attention on him and decides to throw a big party for his return.

At the end of the story, we find out that the older brother resents the attention his little brother is receiving. After all, he stayed home and worked faithfully. Meanwhile, his brother left, squandered all he had, and got to return home for a party in his honor. The father assures him, “all that I have is yours. But your brother was lost and now he’s found.”

This parable not only reiterates God’s tender love for the lost, but it’s also a rebuke for the Pharisees who resent the sinners and tax collectors gathering around Jesus.

Small group questions

- Bearing in mind that this parable is in response to the Pharisees’ comment about Jesus that “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:1-2), how would you sum up Jesus’ point with this story?
- What observations can we make about God from looking at the behavior of the father?
- What changes do we see in the character of the younger son over the course of this story?
- Can you identify with how the older brother felt when his younger brother showed up and received such lavish attention after he stayed home and looked after his father’s interests? Is he wrong to have such feelings?
- Who do you most identify with in this story and why?



34

Passage: [Luke 16:1–9](#)

Audience: A large crowd (including tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and teachers of the law)

Context: Jesus continues to teach.

Key verse: “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings” (Luke 16:9).

The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

Of all Jesus’ parables, this is one of the most confusing. Most parables make it easy to discern who the characters are intended to represent, but in this one, all of the characters seem to be a little unethical and dishonest. The point of this parable isn’t that we should emulate one of the characters, but rather, understand the principle.

A rich man finds out his manager has been wasting his resources, so he fires him. Not wanting to beg or work a manual labor position, the manager cooks up a scheme to save himself. He calls up all the people who owe the manager, and he cuts their bills in half. This way the master can get paid, and the people will owe him. He intends to leverage what he’s saved those debtors into a future job offer.

Jesus’ point is that unscrupulous people are often more shrewd with their resources than godly people. But where the shrewd manager was able to use money to secure a future for himself, we can use money to “lay up treasures in heaven” (Matthew 6:20). We need to use our resources in a way that considers our long-term goals.

Small group questions

- We’re pretty used to associating various parable characters with God, Jesus, or ourselves. But this is an instance where doing so makes the parable harder to figure out rather than easier. Why is that?
 - Everyone in this parable is a little dishonest.
- What do you think is the principle Jesus wanted the people to get out of this parable?
- How are we often short-sighted when it comes to managing worldly wealth?
- What does it look like to be more long-term oriented when it comes to how we use our resources?
- What do you think it means for us to “store up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:20)?”



35

Passage: [Luke 16:19–31](#)

Audience: A large crowd (including tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and teachers of the law)

Context: The Pharisees scoffed at Jesus because of their love of money.

Key verse: “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead’” (Luke 16:31).



The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

Like most parables, the story of the rich man and Lazarus has one central point. It's easy to get bogged down in the details and try to make this parable provide information about the afterlife that Jesus probably never intended.

This is another story about the great reversal at the end of the age. It concerns an extremely wealthy man who passes by a poor beggar named Lazarus every day. When they both die, the rich man finds himself in torment in Hades while Lazarus is in paradise with the Jewish patriarch, Abraham.

The rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus back, so he can warn his brothers that they need to change their ways. Abraham says, no. They had all of the instruction in the law about justice and how to treat the poor. If they chose to ignore that, they'd also ignore someone who rose from the dead.

Jesus' point is clear. We are responsible for acting on the truth that we know.

Lazarus is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Eleazar, which means “God supports” or “God helps.”

For a closer look at this parable, check out the post “What is the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus About?”

Small group questions

- There are a lot of sensational things we can focus on in this parable, but doing so makes it harder to get down to what Jesus is trying to address. What do you think the point is here?
 - When people focus on the afterlife elements of this story, it creates more problems than it offers illumination. There's nothing appealing about an afterlife where suffering people we used to know beg us for relief. Instead of using this parable to create a theology about eternity, it's essential to focus on the lessons learned by the characters in the story.
- Why do you think that Jesus only names the rich man in this parable?
 - In the real world, a poor beggar would be anonymous. But in this story, it's the beggar who has an identity and the rich man who is anonymous.
- Is there any indication that the rich man abused or contributed to Lazarus' plight?
 - In keeping with the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, the rich man's sin seems to be simply accepting Lazarus as part of his landscape without offering to do anything to help.
- Why does the rich man want to send Lazarus to visit his brothers?
 - The rich man addresses Abraham as “father Abraham,” which communicates that the rich man and his brothers are Jewish. The rich man wants Lazarus to go to his brothers to warn them of their responsibility to the poor so they don't suffer the same fate.
- Abraham refuses to send Lazarus to the brothers, telling the rich man that they have Moses and the prophets to warn them. What does he mean?
 - There is plenty in the Law that communicates the importance of caring for the poor. If they're going to ignore the sacred writings, nothing can be done.
- A critical lesson here is that you are responsible for the truth that you know. Why is this a lesson that we all need to take very seriously?
 - We're all used to going to church every week and reading our Bibles, but we are responsible for not just hearing Scripture's words, but for putting them into practice.
- What is one element of this parable that really sticks with you?

36

Passage: [Luke 18:2–8](#)

Audience: The disciples

Context: Teaching about persistent prayer

Key verse: “And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?” (Luke 18:7)

The Parable of the Persistent Widow

To teach the disciples about praying without giving up, Jesus told a story about a widow who had a case before a crooked judge. Without the ability to pay him off, all she could do was pester him for justice. Over time, she wore the judge down, and he ruled in her favor.

While Jesus is encouraging us to model our prayer life after this widow, He is not saying that the crooked judge is like God. In fact, His point is that if even a bad judge can be worn down over time, how much more the Creator of the universe who wants to give you every good thing?

For a little more insight, check out [“Three Lessons on Prayer from the Parables of Jesus.”](#)

Sometimes Jewish disputes were elevated beyond Jewish elders, and judges from Herod or Rome had to intervene. These judges were almost always corrupt (and easily bribed), so if you were poor, you didn’t have a chance of having the court rule in your favor.

Small group questions

- Do you ever get tired of praying the same prayers? How does this parable address that feeling?
- Do you think Jesus is saying that God is like an unjust judge?
 - Not at all. He’s saying that if you can wear down a judge who’s on the take, how much easier is it to convince God—who loves you—to assist you?
- What helps you keep praying even when you feel like it’s fruitless?
- Do you have a story about a prayer you stuck with until your prayer was answered?

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37

Passage: [Luke 18:10–14](#)

Audience: A large crowd

Context: “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable” (Luke 18:9).

Key verse: “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 18:14b).



The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Self-righteousness is one trait that Jesus didn’t seem to suffer gladly. He used the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector as a way to communicate the dangers of thinking too highly of yourself.

A tax collector and a Pharisee went up to pray, and the Pharisee spent most of his time congratulating himself for how righteous he was—even going so far as to thank God that he wasn’t a sinner like the tax-gatherer. But the tax collector beat his breast and asked God to have mercy on him.

According to Jesus, it was the tax collector who went home justified.

For more insight, check out [“Three Lessons on Prayer from the Parables of Jesus.”](#)

Small group questions

- When are you most tempted to be self-righteous or look down on others?
- Try to read this parable through the eyes of a first-century Jewish person. Pharisees were looked up to as examples of piety. Tax collectors were traitors and crooks. Does this parable hit differently knowing that the Pharisees were the heroes?
- Rephrase this parable with modern equivalents.
- Why do you think humility is so important in God’s economy?
- How can we become more humble in the practice of our faith?

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