

## Parables Study Guide

### Parables- Timeless, timely tales Jesus told

#### Introduction

A man met a joke writer at a party. 'What do you do for a living?' he asked. 'I write jokes for children.' 'Really have you sold anything yet?' 'Yes. My TV, car, and family silver.'

In a sense parables are like jokes. They are designed to catch people off guard, and provoke an immediate response. Parables it has been said are 'to capture the listener and make them a participant, overturning their world view and leading them to question their most basic values.' If a parable has to be explained, it loses much of its force, just the same way as a joke does when someone doesn't get it, and it needs to be explained.

A parable is therefore an extended metaphor or illustration. It is an illustration turned into a tale, spoken by a gifted teacher. Like most illustrations parables usually have one central point. They differ from allegories, stories in which the details abound with hidden meanings. A failure to distinguish between a parable and an allegory has led many Bible students pursuing meanings in meaningless details.

The parables and teachings of Jesus focus on the kingdom of God. For Jesus's kingdom is not about earthly territory being ruled over, but rather the rule of God on earth through Jesus. Jesus demonstrated the kingdom authority over disease, demons, nature, sin and death. These are still challenges which connect with our contemporary culture. Parables brilliantly illustrate important truths about Christ's kingdom which demand a response from us today.

## Study 1 The Parable of the Sower

**The purpose:** to understand the nature of parables, and our response to them

### The big picture

1. Describe a firsthand experience, either serious or humorous, you have had either of farming or gardening in terms of caring for plants. What have you observed about the role of soil in relation to a plant's ability to thrive?

### The biblical picture

Read Matthew Ch 13:1-23

2. Imagine yourself as a farmer listening to this parable in Jesus day. What immediate responses might you have to the images of seed and sower?

3. In vs.10 the disciples ask Jesus 'why do you speak to the people in parables?' How would you summarise his answer [vs.11-16]?

4. How do parables help Jesus' followers to understand his kingdom, but also hinder the understanding of those who don't follow him closely? [vs. 12-17]?

5. In vs. 18-23 Jesus explains the meaning to his disciples. The seed is the message of the kingdom, who is the farmer and the soil?

6. Satanic birds destroy the value of God's word for the first group of people. Why? What did these hearers lack [vs. 19]?

7. What can we do to help to understand God's message ?

8. Verses 20-12 describe the kind of person referred to as stony or rocky soil. What examples have you seen of people who respond this way?

9. How can we avoid this in our own lives and discourage it in the lives of others?

10. What kind of person does the third type of soil describe [vs.22]?

### Being in the picture

11. How can we avoid being choked by the weeds and thorns Jesus mentioned?

12. Which of the four kinds of soil do you most identify with today? Why?

13. What are some practical examples of how we can become ' good soil'?

## Study 2

### The Lost Parables

**The purpose: to understand the joyful acceptance of repentance**

#### The big picture

1. Make a list of the descriptive words that paint a picture of a God who is both punitive and harsh. Now read Luke 15:vs.5 & vs.20.

Make a contrasting list of descriptive words that illustrate this portrait of God. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you look at these two images of God?

#### The biblical picture

Read Luke Ch 15:1-32

2. In these three parables compare the way the Pharisees see 'sinners' to the way Jesus says God sees them.
3. Imagine yourself listening to these stories as a Pharisee. What thoughts and feelings might you have in response to these stories?
4. Imagine yourself listening to these stories as one of the people the Pharisees called 'a sinner'. What thoughts and feelings might you have in response to these stories?
5. In reading the parables of Jesus it helps to imagine the sounds, smells, feelings. What comes to mind when you read the parables of the lost sheep, and the lost coin?
6. Who is represented by the central characters [or objects] in each of the parables?
7. How do you account for the intense reactions of the shepherd, woman and father to their losses and discoveries?
8. Look closely at the third parable. How might the Pharisees and the teachers of the law have felt about each of the actions of the younger son? [Vs. 13-16]
9. How might the Pharisees have expected the father to respond when the son returned home?

#### Being in the picture

10. What do the details in vs.20-24 reveal about the feelings of our father in heaven?
11. How can this portrait of God help us feel accepted by the Father, in spite of our sin?

12. Instead of concluding the story at vs.24, Jesus goes on to describe the reaction of the older son[ vs. 25-32]. What additional point do you think Jesus wants to make to the Jewish leaders and why?

13.How can this parable motivate us to love those who are lost?

### **Study 3**

#### **The Good Samaritan**

**The purpose: to understand what it means to love our neighbour.**

#### **The big picture**

1. Do you ever feel guilty when you see either pictures of refugees or starving children on TV or in the papers? Should you? Explain?
2. Think of a time when you hesitated to respond to someone in need. What kept you from responding?

#### **The biblical picture**

Read Luke 10:25-37

3. Put yourself in the place of the expert of the law, who is questioning Jesus. How might you feel in response to your first encounter with Jesus?
4. What kind of answer do you think the lawyer was expecting from Jesus when he asked 'who is my neighbour'?
5. If you were this lawyer, what thoughts feelings might you have to the story Jesus tells in response to your question ' who is my neighbour'?
6. The situation described in vs.30 was common on the dangerous road from Jericho to Jerusalem. In what situations today is non-involvement seen as a wise choice?
7. Why do you suppose Jesus picked a Samaritan, someone from an ethnic group Jews detested, as the hero of the story?
8. Describe the Samaritan's actions from the point of view of [a] personal inconvenience [b] financial cost [c] risk [vs. 34-35]

## **Being in the picture**

9. How do one or more of your answer to question 8 discourage your own neighbourly actins?

10. Christ's question [vs.36] was not intended to prove that Samaritans could be better neighbours than Jews. What was he getting at?

11. 'Go and do likewise.' What exactly was Jesus telling the lawyer to go and do?

12. Think of a time when you experienced love from someone which was expressed in a practical way. What was it like to be loved in this way?

13. In what practical ways can we 'go and do likewise'?

## Study 4

### The Unforgiving Servant

**The purpose: to understand why forgiveness is essential**

#### The big picture

1. As a group make a list of thoughts, feelings and beliefs which create barriers to fully forgiving another person.

#### The biblical picture

Read Matthew 18:21-35

2. How would you describe Peter's question in vs.21?

3. What view of forgiveness does Peter's question reveal?

4. Jesus tells Peter to forgive seventy-times seven times. What is Jesus' point?

5. Ten thousand talents is approximately seven million pounds, and the King's intended action [vs25] would have been considered just. If you were the man, how would you have felt before and after the king cancelled the debt?

6. In the light of this story, how real to you is [a] your indebtedness to God and [b] the marvel of your escape from justice?

7. A hundred denari, is a trivial amount compared to ten thousand talents. What lesson do you think Christ intends by the sum?

8. How should the comparison affect our view of the sins of others?

9. Look at Jesus' parable as a response to Peter's question. What would you say is at the heart of Jesus' answer to Peter?

#### Being in the picture

10. What happens to our spiritual freedom and our fellowship with God when we are critical and unforgiving?

11. Think of someone you have difficulty in forgiving. What barriers keep you from being free to forgive this person?

12. How would remembering God's love and forgiveness towards you help you forgive others?

13. Take some time reflecting on completely, freely and compassionately, God has forgiven you.

## Study 5

### The Widow and the Judge

The purpose: to show the value of persistent prayer

#### The big picture

1. Can you think of a crazy, wild scheme you have ever put your hope in? [maybe think back to your childhood]

#### The biblical picture

Read Luke Ch 18:1-8

2. The characters in this parable are drawn sketchily but vividly. What images come to mind when you think of [a] the widow and [b] the judge?

3. Why do you think the widow is so persistent?

4. How would you define 'persistence' or 'determination' of this sort?

5. What finally motivates the judge to act?

6. What we believe about God, and how we feel about him when we pray may not be the same. In what ways do your feelings and beliefs sometimes conflict when you pray?

7. Use your imagination to fill in the details about those praying to God in vs.6-8. How would you describe them and their circumstances?

8. Jesus told this parable to show us that we should always pray and not give up [vs.1]. How would you explain the uncertainty of his final question in vs.8?

#### Being in the picture

9. Are your prayers as desperate as those described here? Why or why not?

10. In what ways can we expect God to do far more for those in vs.7 than the judge did for the widow?

11. When are you most tempted to give up praying about someone or something?

12. How can this parable encourage you to keep on praying?

## Study 6

### The Wheat and the Weeds

**The purpose:** to understand why judgement needs to be kept in God's hands.

#### The big picture

1. The followers of Jesus have always lived in an environment which is hostile to the life and teaching of Jesus way of living. What difficulties can this environment create for followers of Jesus?

#### The biblical picture

Read Matthew 13:24-30 & 36-43

2. What title would you give this parable?
3. What crisis occurs at the beginning of the parable [vs.24-26]?
4. The owners servants offer to pull up the weeds. What alternative does the owner propose, and why?
5. According to Jesus what do the key elements of the parable stand for[vs. 37-39]?
6. What is the meaning of the weeds being pulled up and burned in the fire[ vs. 41-42]?
7. Like the owner's servants in vs.28, how have Christians sometimes pulled up the weeds prematurely?
8. What have been some of the consequences of this misguided concern?

#### Being in the picture

9. Do you see the field as the church or the world- or both? Explain.
10. How does this parable help you understand God's patience and plan for dealing with evil?
11. What hopes does the parable offer Christians?

## Study 7

### The Parables of Money & Self-worth

**The purpose: to understand that human values of worth and fairness are often not the same as kingdom values**

#### The big picture

1. List as many examples as you can think of that demonstrate how our society links people's value with their wealth.
2. What do you believe is God's perspective of your value as a person?

#### The biblical picture

Read Matthew 19:16-20:16

1. What themes do you see running through these verses?
2. Before answering the man's question vs. 16 Jesus asks a number of his own vs.17. Why?
3. How do you think the man feels about this exchange?
4. Jesus replies 'if you want to enter life, obey the commandments'. If the New Testament teaches that we cannot be saved by obeying the law, then what does Jesus mean?
5. The man implies that he has kept all the commandments. Drawing from the text would you say this is true?
6. What value would you see in following Jesus' model here as you present the gospel to non-Christians?
7. In biblical times people thought wealth was a reward for righteousness. How does Jesus challenge this view[vs. 23-26]?
8. What can we learn from the rich man in this story?

## Being in the picture

9. In Matthew 20:1-16, how does his parable arise out of the discussion over the rich young man?

10. Imagine that you had borne the burden of the work in the heat of the day[vs.12] yet were paid the same as those who only worked an hour. How would you feel, and why?

11. Although the landowner's actions seem unfair, he claims they are not[ vs. 13-15] Why aren't they unfair?

12. The landlord clearly represents God. How do his values as seen in this parable conflict with society's values?

13. What can we learn from God's generosity as shown in this parable?

## Study 8

### The Wise and Foolish Virgins

The purpose: to realise the importance of waiting in hope

#### The big picture

1. Think of a time you waited a long time for someone or something important to you. What was the waiting like? What helped you maintain hope?

#### The biblical picture

Read Matthew 24:36-25:13

2. List the parables Jesus used here, how do they compare and contrast?
3. Put yourself in each parable. How would it change the picture if you, as the character, were waiting with expectation for 'the coming of the Son of Man'?
4. How will the coming of the Son of Man be similar to the days of Noah [24:36-41]?
5. Christ's main point is not to warn against eating, drinking and giving in marriage. What then is he emphasising?
6. Jesus compares his coming as thief breaking into a house, and master returning home. What does each story emphasise about [a] the nature of the Lord's return [b] our responsibility?
7. If the Lord returned today what would he hope to find us doing [24:45-46]?
8. In the verse you have just looked at in question 7 would you say that Jesus' illustrations about his coming were joyful or fearful events? Explain.
9. How did the bridegroom's long delay reveal the difference between the wise and foolish virgins [25:6-12]?
10. According to this parable, what constitutes wisdom in relation to Christ's return?

#### Being in the picture

11. It has been over two thousand years since Jesus promised to return. What negative effects might this have on us?
12. What can we do to overcome these negative effects and wait with expectations for his return?

## Study 9

### The Parable of the Talents

**The purpose:** To understand the key role that trust plays in our willingness to risk investing the resources God has given us in furthering his kingdom.

#### The big picture

1. If someone loaned you a million pounds, and you had to pay it back in ten years, what would you do with it?

#### The biblical picture

Read Matthew 25:14-30

2. What title might you give this story?

3. How and why does the Master entrust his money to these servants?

4. A talent was not a personal ability, but a measure of money equal to about one thousand pounds. Put yourself in the place of the first and third servants. What thoughts beliefs feelings would you have experienced if you were trusted with their talents?

5. Compare the reaction of the master to the first and second servants, what matters to him, and what does not matter to him?

6. As you look at the statements from the three servants[ vs. 20,22, 24-25], what can you infer about their relationships with their master?

7. How might their relationships have affected their actions in vs.16-18?

8. Think of who you have done jobs for. What bearing did your relationship with them have on your attitude towards the job?

9. How is the master, like, and unlike God?

#### Being in the picture

10. How does our relationship with God affect our attitudes towards what we do?

11. List some of the resources God has given his people to further his kingdom?

12. How can you faithfully handle the responsibilities God has given you?

## Study 10

### The Pharisee & the Tax Collector

The purpose: to understand humility

#### The big picture

1. Think of a time when you were tempted to see yourself as superior to someone else spiritually. What dangers do you see in giving in to this temptation?
2. Think of a time when you have felt judged as 'less spiritual'. What wounds did being judged like that create in your heart and mind?

#### The biblical picture

Read Luke 18:9-14

3. How would you re-tell the story of the two men using modern characters?
4. Put yourself in the Pharisees place. What would this experience of seeing oneself as superior feel like?
5. The Pharisee addressed God, but to what extent does God occupy his attention?
6. What do vs.11-12 reveal about how the Pharisee sees himself? What does this reveal about his attitude to God?
7. How often does the Pharisee compare himself with others?[ vs.11]
8. How does the Pharisees comparison with others affect you when you compare yourself with those you look down upon?
9. Put yourself in the tax collectors place. What do you imagine he is thinking and feeling?
10. How does the way the tax collector views himself[vs.13] contrast with how the Pharisee views himself?

#### Being in the picture

11. Notice the positions, postures, gestures of the Pharisee and the tax collector. What conclusions can we draw from these contrasts in their body language?
12. In what ways are we tempted to feel spiritually superior to others today?
13. What, in your experience, is the relationship between awareness of our need for God's mercy and genuine humility?

## Study 11

### The Parable of the Rich Fool

The purpose: to consider the dangers of greed, and the importance of being spiritually rich

#### The big picture

1. As a group make a list of as many fears as you can that keep people focused on making and having 'enough' money.
2. Make a mental list of your personal anxieties about making and having 'enough' money. How do the two lists compare, and contrast.

#### The biblical picture

##### Read Luke 12:13-21

3. Describe everything we know or infer about the man who comes to Jesus [vs. 13-15]
4. Put yourself in the man's place as he listens to the story Jesus tells in response to his question. What thoughts and feelings might he have had in response?
5. Jesus tells us, 'watch out, be on your guard against all kinds of greed.' [vs.15] How would you describe the experience of greed?
6. Why is greed so dangerous?
7. How would you evaluate the actions of the rich man in vs.16-18?
8. How would you evaluate his attitude in vs.19?
9. How does Jesus expose the man's false sense of security [vs.20]?
10. Is Jesus condemning material prosperity in this parable [ vs. 21]? Explain.
11. What does it mean to be 'rich towards God'?

#### Being in the picture

12. During times of prosperity, why is it easy to feel secure and at ease?
13. How does being 'rich towards God' help us feel 'free from all kinds of greed'?
14. What practical steps can we take to become spiritually rich?

## Study 12

### The Rich Man & Lazarus

**Purpose:** to realise the importance to being open to open to hearing from God, and open to God's wisdom and love

#### The big picture

1. Have you ever been asked for money from a street person? How did you react?
2. Think of a time when you did not want to hear God's wisdom or Jesus' teachings? What helped you become more open to hear and respond?

#### The biblical picture

**Read Luke 16:19-31**

3. How does the parable reveal the rich man's lack of concern for Lazarus [vs.19-21]?
4. How would you account for the rich man's indifference towards Lazarus?
5. What are some of the ways that you have heard people explain what some in society are poor?
6. Which of the ways of thinking in question 5 do you find to be the most biblical and why?
7. How does the parable contrast the state of the two men before their death, at their burial and after their death?
8. Does the parable teach that Lazarus experienced heavenly bliss because of his earthly poverty and that the rich man experienced torment because of his wealth on earth? Explain.
9. Contrast the rich man's accessibility to Lazarus in life and death [vs. 20, 23, 26]
10. What is the one thing that Abraham asks the rich man to do [vs.25]?
11. Why does God send messengers from the dead to warn us [vs.31]?

### **Being in the picture**

12. Why did the resurrection of Jesus fail to convince people of his day, and why does it still fail to convince people today?

13. How does the parable speak to you about ways that you might be withholding compassion from people in your life?

14. How does this parable speak to you about ways that you might be closed to hearing God's wisdom or at following Jesus' teaching?