EARS TO HEAR

Every Parable of Jesus, Who Heard It, and What History Adds



Simple stories. Searching questions. A Savior who still calls.

ANDREW DOMINGUEZ

TRINFINITY
Enterprises

Ears to Hear

Every Parable of Jesus, Who Heard It, and What History Adds

Andrew Dominguez

Ears to Hear: Every Parable of Jesus, Who Heard It, and What History Adds

Copyright 2026 by Andrew Dominguez.

I own the copyright to everything in this book. I freely allow anyone to read, copy, print, quote, share, and teach from it, and to hand out or post copies, at no cost, as long as the text is not changed and this notice stays with it.

Publishing this book, meaning releasing it as an edition of your own in print or electronic form, whether sold or given away, requires my written permission first. Requests go to andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com.

The full text can be read, printed and downloaded free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Scripture quotations are taken from the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB), with familiar English forms of personal names, copyright 2026 Andrew Dominguez. The complete SLB is free to read at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb.

Independently published.

Trinfinity Enterprises, Dayton, Nevada.

Quotations from Josephus and Pliny the Elder come from public domain English translations, named where they are quoted.

Please read before you use this book. This book is for general information and education only. It is not legal, medical, financial, tax, or other professional advice, and reading it does not create a professional relationship of any kind. Laws, rules, prices, and research change, and every situation is different. Before you act on anything in this book, check it against current sources and talk with a lawyer, doctor, licensed professional, or other qualified expert as your situation calls for. I worked hard to get the facts right, but I can't promise that every detail is complete, correct, or current. You use this information at your own risk. To the fullest extent the law allows, Andrew Dominguez, Trinfinity Enterprises, and Andrew Dominguez's heirs, estate, successors, and assigns accept no responsibility or liability for any loss, injury, or damage of any kind that comes from using or relying on this book.

A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Book

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this book direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

Contents

Before You Begin....1

Part One: Understanding the Parables

Chapter 1: What a Parable Is....5
Chapter 2: Why Jesus Taught in Parables....9
Chapter 3: How to Read a Parable....12

Part Two: Parables in Galilee

Chapter 4: Word Pictures From the Sermon on the Mount....16
Chapter 5: Short Answers to His Critics....22
Chapter 6: The Sower and the Soils....28
Chapter 7: Seeds, Weeds, and Leaven....33
Chapter 8: Treasure, a Pearl, and a Net....38
Chapter 9: What Comes From the Heart....42

Part Three: On the Road to Jerusalem

Chapter 10: The Good Samaritan....48
Chapter 11: A Friend at Midnight and a Rich Fool....53
Chapter 12: Ready for the Master....57
Chapter 13: A Fig Tree and a Narrow Door....61
Chapter 14: Parables at the Dinner Table....65
Chapter 15: Lost and Found....70
Chapter 16: Money and Eternity....76
Chapter 17: Prayer, Pride, and Humility....81
Chapter 18: Generous Grace and Faithful Service....86

Part Four: The Last Week, the Gospel of John, and You

Chapter 19: Parables in the Temple Courts....92
Chapter 20: Parables of His Return....97
Chapter 21: The Word Pictures in John....104
Chapter 22: What the Parables Show Us About God....110
Chapter 23: What the Parables Ask of Us....113
Chapter 24: Do You Have Ears to Hear?....116
Appendix A: Master List of Parables....119
Appendix B: The Parables in the Four Gospels....123
Appendix C: Outside Sources at a Glance....125
Appendix D: Words to Know....127
Appendix E: Sources and Credits....129
About This Book....130
Scripture Index....131

Before You Begin

And He was saying to them, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Mark 4:9 (SLB)

Jesus was the greatest teacher who ever lived, and most of the time He taught by telling stories. A farmer throws seed on four kinds of ground. A shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep to find one. A young man wastes his inheritance and comes home hoping to be hired as a servant, and his father runs down the road to meet him. A traveler is beaten and left for dead, and the man who stops to help him is the one nobody expected.

When I translated the Steadfast Literal Bible, I wanted to hear Jesus' parables the way the people standing in front of Him heard them. Knowing who was in the crowd and what their daily work looked like changes how a parable lands. I wrote this book so everyday readers can hear these stories with fresh ears.

These stories are called parables. They are short, plain, and easy to remember. A child can retell them. And yet some of the brightest people in history have spent their whole lives trying to get to the bottom of them. That is the way Jesus meant it to be.

This book is a companion to my book on the miracles of the Bible, *By His Mighty Hand*. In that book we looked at what God did. In this one we listen to what Jesus said, in the form He used more than any other.

What You Will Find in This Book

I have tried to gather every parable Jesus told in the four Gospels, from the short one-line pictures like salt and light to the long stories like the prodigal son. Each one gets its own numbered entry, and each entry tells you four things:

1. **Where to read it.** Every entry gives the Bible references, including the parallel accounts when more than one Gospel tells the same parable.
2. **Who heard it.** Jesus did not tell His parables into empty air. He told them to crowds, to His disciples in private, to Pharisees at a dinner table, and to the chief priests in the temple courts. Who was listening often tells you what the parable means.
3. **What prompted it.** Many parables answer a question, a complaint, or an event. A lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" The Pharisees grumble that Jesus eats with sinners. A man wants Jesus to make his brother split the family money. When you know what started the story, you are halfway to understanding it.
4. **What it means.** I retell each parable in plain words, explain anything about first century life that a modern reader might miss, and draw out what it teaches about God, about Jesus, and about us.

Where a writer outside the Bible helps us see the world the parables were told in, you will find a gray box marked **Behind the Story**. I quote ancient writers like the Jewish historian Josephus and the Roman writer Pliny the Elder only where I could open the text and check the words myself, and I tell you where to find them.

How I Handle Outside Sources

I use the same rules here that I used in the miracles book. Every box carries one of three labels:

- **Text confirmed.** We have the writer's words, the text is not seriously in doubt, and I opened a published translation and checked the quote.
- **Background.** The box explains a custom, a coin, a plant, a place, or a way of life from the time of Jesus. This is the kind of thing any good Bible dictionary covers. I tell it in my own words and do not pretend it is more certain than it is.
- **Disputed.** Scholars argue over the source, its date, or what it means. I tell you what the argument is and leave it there.

The parables do not need outside proof the way a historical claim might. Jesus made them up on purpose, to teach. Nobody needs to dig up the field where the treasure was hidden. But the parables are full of real life: real coins, real roads, real seeds, real wages, and real hatred between real peoples. When we understand that world, the stories hit the way they hit the first people who heard them.

What Counts as a Parable

This is harder than it sounds, and Chapter 1 spends some time on it. Here is the short version of the line I drew.

I included every story Jesus told to make a point, such as the sower, the good Samaritan, and the ten virgins. I also included the short comparisons the Gospels themselves call parables, or that work the same way, such as the mustard seed, the leaven, new wine in old wineskins, and the strong man who must be tied up before his house can be robbed. And I included the extended word pictures in John's Gospel, such as the good shepherd and the vine and the branches. John uses a different Greek word for them, but they do the same work.

I did not number every figure of speech Jesus ever used. When He calls Herod "this fox" (Luke 13:32) or tells the disciples to be wise as serpents, that is a vivid way of speaking, not a parable. I also did not number the Old Testament parables, like the one Nathan told King David, though Chapter 1 looks at them because they show where Jesus' way of teaching came from.

Good Bible teachers count the parables differently. Some lists have about thirty. Some have more than sixty. That is fine. The point is not the number. The point is to hear what Jesus said.

How the Book Is Laid Out

Part One: Understanding the Parables answers the basic questions. What is a parable? Why did Jesus teach this way? And how do we read a parable without missing the point or making it say things Jesus never meant?

Part Two: Parables in Galilee covers the early years of His ministry: the word pictures in the Sermon on the Mount, the short parables He used to answer His critics, the great chapter of kingdom parables beside the Sea of Galilee, and His teaching on forgiveness.

Part Three: On the Road to Jerusalem follows Jesus on His last journey south, where Luke records many of the best known stories: the good Samaritan, the rich fool, the great banquet, the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, the rich man and Lazarus, the Pharisee and the tax collector, and the parable of the minas told near Jericho.

Part Four: The Last Week, the Gospel of John, and You covers the parables Jesus told in the temple courts in the last days before the cross, the parables about His return, the great word pictures in John, and what all of it means for you.

At the back you will find a master list of every parable in one table, a chart of the parables across the four Gospels, a summary of every outside source, a list of words to know, a list of sources, and an index of every Bible verse cited, with page numbers.

Every chapter ends with **Study Questions** for your own reading or for a small group.

A Few Notes Before We Start

Scripture quotations in this book come from the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). Words set in bold italics inside a quotation are words added in English to make the sentence read clearly. When I don't quote a whole parable, I give the reference so you can read it for yourself, and I hope you will. Read each parable in your Bible before you read what I say about it. Jesus' words are better than mine. Don't take my word for anything in this book. Open your Bible and check it, the way the Bereans did in Acts 17:11.

I capitalize the pronouns that refer to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit (He, Him, His, You, Your) as a sign of reverence. Inside a Scripture quotation, I leave the capitals exactly as the translation prints them. Inside quotations from other writers, like Josephus, I leave their words exactly as they were translated.

The older outside sources are quoted from public domain English translations: William Whiston's translation of Josephus (1737), and the Loeb translation of Pliny's *Natural History* by H. Rackham and others, as posted on Wikisource. Whiston's English is old fashioned in places. I left it alone so you can trust that it is what he wrote.

One last thing. Jesus ended His first great parable with a warning: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:9). The parables are not puzzles for clever people. They are tests for honest people. My prayer is that as you read, you will not just learn about the parables, but hear the One who told them.

Part One: Understanding the Parables

Chapter 1: What a Parable Is

> *All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and without a parable He was not speaking to them*
>
> Matthew 13:34 (SLB)

Matthew tells us something about the way Jesus taught that is easy to read past. When He spoke to the crowds, He used parables, and "without a parable He was not speaking to them" (Matthew 13:34). Mark says the same thing (Mark 4:34). That does not mean Jesus never said anything plainly. The Sermon on the Mount is full of plain commands. It means that when the crowds gathered, the story was His normal tool. If we want to understand Jesus, we have to understand His parables.

For years I denied my drinking, even when the people closest to me could see it. Pride puts up a wall when someone confronts you head-on. A story can slip past that wall before you realize it is about you. Jesus used parables to help us see ourselves honestly when direct advice bounces off.

The Word Itself

The English word *parable* comes from the Greek word *parabolē*. It is made of two parts: *para*, meaning "beside," and *ballō*, meaning "to throw." A parable throws one thing beside another so you can compare them. Jesus lays a familiar picture, like a farmer, a coin, or a wedding, next to a truth about God and His kingdom, and lets the familiar thing shine light on the unfamiliar one.

Behind the Greek word stands a Hebrew one, *mashal*. It is a broad word. It can mean a proverb, a riddle, a taunt, a wise saying, or a story with a point. The book of Proverbs is called in Hebrew the *mishle* of Solomon, the same word in plural form. So when the Jews of Jesus' day heard Him tell a parable, they would not have thought of it as a new kind of thing. They would have heard a rabbi doing what wise teachers had always done, only better than anyone ever had.

The Gospels use *parabolē* for more than long stories. Jesus calls the proverb "Physician, heal yourself" a parable (Luke 4:23). Mark calls the saying about what goes into a man and what comes out of him a parable (Mark 7:17). So the Bible's own use of the word is wider than ours. A parable can be a full story, a short comparison, or a picture packed into one sentence.

John's Gospel uses a different word, *paroimia*, usually translated "figure of speech." When Jesus describes the shepherd, the door, and the sheepfold, John says, "Jesus spoke this figure of speech to them, but they did not know what the things were which He was speaking to them" (John 10:6). The word is different, but the method is the same. A picture from ordinary life carries a truth about God.

Parables Before Jesus

Jesus did not invent the parable. God had used stories to reach hard hearts long before. The best known Old Testament example is the story the prophet Nathan told King David.

David had taken Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, and then arranged for Uriah to be killed in battle. For months he covered it up. Then God sent Nathan to him with what sounded like a legal case.

> *And the LORD sent Nathan to David; and he came to him and said to him, "Two men were in one city, one rich and one poor. The rich* ***man*** *had very many flocks and herds. And the poor* ***man*** *had nothing at all except one little ewe lamb which he had bought; and he nourished it, and it grew up with him and with his sons together. From his morsel it would eat, and from his cup it would drink, and in his bosom it would lie, and it was like a daughter to him. And a traveler came to the rich man, and he spared taking from his own flock and from his own herd to prepare* ***a meal*** *for the wayfarer who had come to him; and he took the ewe lamb of the poor man and prepared it for the man who had come to him."* (2 Samuel 12:1-4)

David was furious. He said the man who did this deserved to die, and that he must pay back four times over. Then Nathan said four words that went through David like a spear: "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7).

That is how a parable works. David could not see his own sin when it was named straight out, because he had spent months explaining it away. But he could see it clearly in a story about someone else. By the time he realized the story was about him, he had already passed judgment. He had condemned himself out of his own mouth. And to his credit, he broke. "I have sinned against the LORD," he said (2 Samuel 12:13), and Psalm 51 came out of that moment.

There are other Old Testament parables too. Jotham, the youngest son of Gideon, stood on Mount Gerizim and told the men of Shechem a story about trees looking for a king (Judges 9:7-15). The olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine all refused, because they were busy being useful. Only the bramble, the thorn bush, agreed to rule, and it threatened to burn up everyone who did not take shelter in its shade. The point was hard to miss. The men of Shechem had just made Abimelech, a murderer, their king.

Isaiah sang a song about a vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7). A man planted it on a fertile hill, cleared the stones, planted the best vines, built a watchtower, and dug a winepress. Then he waited for good grapes, and it produced wild ones. Isaiah tells us plainly what the vineyard was: "For the vineyard of the LORD of armies ***is*** the house of Israel" (Isaiah 5:7). Hold on to that song. Jesus will pick it up again in the last week of His life, in one of His sharpest parables.

Ezekiel told a riddle about two great eagles and a vine (Ezekiel 17:1-10), and God Himself called it a parable (Ezekiel 17:2). Ezekiel's own listeners complained about him, "Is he not speaking parables?" (Ezekiel 20:49).

So Jesus stood in a long line of prophets who used stories to get past people's defenses. But no one before Him had used them so often, so simply, or with such power.

What Makes Jesus' Parables Different

Jewish teachers in the centuries after Jesus also told parables, and some of them are collected in the Talmud and other rabbinic writings. Many of those stories begin with a king, a banquet, or a vineyard,

just as Jesus' parables do. That should not surprise us. Those were the pictures everyone in that world understood.

But there are real differences. Most rabbinic parables were used to explain a verse of Scripture. They served the text. Jesus' parables were different. He did not usually tell a parable to explain a verse. He told parables to announce that the kingdom of God had arrived, and that it had arrived in Him. The sower who sows the word, the bridegroom who has come to the wedding, the son the vineyard owner sends last of all, the shepherd who goes looking for the lost sheep: over and over, Jesus puts Himself in the story.

Behind the Story: Rabbinic parables (*Background*)

Collections of Jewish teaching put together after the time of Jesus, such as the Mishnah (about A.D. 200) and the Talmud (about A.D. 400 to 600), contain hundreds of parables, many of them about kings and their servants or sons. I have not quoted any of them in this book, because I could not open the original texts to check the wording myself. What can be said safely is this: Jesus' way of teaching fit the Jewish world He lived in, and later Jewish teachers used the same kind of story. Because the rabbinic collections were written down later, scholars disagree on how much of what they contain goes back to the time of Jesus.

Story Parables, Short Parables, and Word Pictures

When you put all of Jesus' parables side by side, they fall into three rough groups.

- **Story parables.** These have characters, a plot, and usually a surprise. The good Samaritan, the prodigal son, the unforgiving servant, and the ten virgins are story parables. Most are found in Matthew and Luke.
- **Short parables.** These are comparisons with only a sentence or two of action. "The kingdom of the heavens is like leaven." "No one puts new wine into old wineskins." The mustard seed, the hidden treasure, and the strong man are short parables.
- **Word pictures.** These are images that describe what Jesus or His people are, such as salt, light, the good shepherd, and the vine. The Gospels do not always call them parables, but they work the same way, and many teachers include them.

These are not hard walls. Some short parables are almost stories, and some stories are only a few verses long. I mention the groups only because they help explain why different books count the parables so differently. A list that counts only the story parables might have thirty. A list that counts every comparison might have more than sixty. In this book I have numbered 66. Appendix A lists them all in one table.

What a Parable Is Not

A parable is not a fable. In Aesop's fables, animals talk and the moral is usually ordinary good sense: slow and steady wins the race. Jesus' parables are about real life, with real farmers and real fishermen, and the point is never just good sense. It is about God, His kingdom, and our response to Him.

A parable is also not an allegory in the full sense, where every single detail stands for something else. Some parables have several parts that clearly stand for something, and Jesus Himself explained a few of them that way. In the parable of the sower, the seed is the word and the different soils are different kinds

of hearers (Matthew 13:18-23). But that does not mean every detail of every parable is a secret code. Chapter 3 looks at how the church learned that lesson the hard way.

And a parable is not just an illustration, like a sermon story told to keep people awake. When Jesus told a parable, the parable *was* the message. It was not a decoration on the message. It is designed to make you see something and then to make you decide something.

A Parable Asks for a Verdict

Remember what happened to David. Nathan's story drew him in, and before he knew it, he had pronounced a verdict. That is what Jesus' parables do too.

After telling the parable of the two sons, Jesus asked the chief priests, "Which of the two did the will of the father?" (Matthew 21:31). After the good Samaritan, He asked the lawyer, "Which therefore of these three seems to you to have become a neighbor to the one who fell among the robbers?" (Luke 10:36). After the wicked tenants, He asked what the owner of the vineyard would do to them, and the leaders answered, and then realized He was talking about them (Matthew 21:40-45).

A parable is like a mirror held up in front of you. You start out watching the story, and you end up seeing yourself in it. That is why some people loved Jesus' parables and others wanted to kill Him for telling them.

Study Questions

1. Before reading this chapter, how would you have defined a parable? What would you add to your definition now?
2. Read 2 Samuel 12:1-13. Why do you think Nathan used a story instead of simply accusing David to his face?
3. The Hebrew word *mashal* can mean a proverb, a riddle, or a story. What do all of these have in common?
4. Why does it matter that Jesus often put Himself in His parables, as the sower, the bridegroom, or the son?
5. Think of a time a story helped you see something about yourself that you could not see when someone told you straight out. What happened?

Chapter 2: Why Jesus Taught in Parables

> *so that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden from **the** foundation of **the** world."*
>
> Matthew 13:35 (SLB)

Most of us assume that Jesus told stories to make things easier to understand, the way a good teacher uses a picture to help a child learn. That is partly true. Parables are easy to remember, and they make hard truths come alive. But when the disciples asked Jesus why He spoke in parables, His answer was surprising. He said the parables were meant to reveal the truth to some people and to hide it from others.

The Disciples' Question

It happened the day Jesus told the parable of the sower. He had been teaching from a boat, with the crowd on the shore. Afterward, the disciples came to Him with a question.

> *And the disciples, having come, said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" And answering, He said to them, "Because to you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Because of this I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."* (Matthew 13:10-13)

Then Jesus quoted Isaiah 6:9-10, the words God gave Isaiah on the day He called him to be a prophet. God told Isaiah to preach to a people who would hear and not understand, and see and not perceive, because their hearts had grown dull. Jesus said that prophecy was being fulfilled again in His own day (Matthew 13:14-15).

Then He turned to His disciples with some of the warmest words in the Gospels.

> *But blessed **are** your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous **men** longed to see what you see, and did not see, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear.* (Matthew 13:16-17)

Revealing and Concealing

So which is it? Did Jesus tell parables to make things clear, or to hide them? The answer is both, and it depends on the heart of the hearer.

Think of the way the sun works on two different materials. The same sun that melts wax hardens clay. The difference is not in the sun but in what it shines on. A parable works like that. To a person who is hungry for God, a parable opens a door. It pulls him in, makes him think, and sends him to Jesus with questions. To a person who has already decided against Jesus, the same parable is just a story about seeds. He walks away with nothing, and he is a little harder than before.

Notice what the disciples did. They did not understand the parable of the sower either, at least not at first. But they came to Jesus and asked. Mark tells us that "privately He was explaining all things to His disciples" (Mark 4:34). The difference between the disciples and the crowd was not that the disciples were smarter. The difference was that they stayed and asked.

That is the meaning of the strange saying in the middle of Jesus' answer: "For whoever has, to him will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him" (Matthew 13:12). The person who receives what Jesus says gets more light. The person who brushes it off loses even the little light he had. Truth is never neutral. We either move toward it or away from it.

A Word of Judgment and a Word of Mercy

It is important to see when Jesus began to teach this way. Matthew places the great chapter of parables, Matthew 13, right after the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul, the ruler of demons (Matthew 12:24). They had seen a blind and mute man healed, and they had called the work of the Holy Spirit the work of the devil. Jesus warned them that this was a very serious sin (Matthew 12:31-32).

After that, Jesus' teaching to the crowds took on a new shape. Many Bible teachers see this as a turning point. The leaders had rejected Him openly, and so He began to speak in a way that only those with open hearts could follow. In that sense, the parables were a judgment. God was giving people over to the blindness they had chosen.

But they were also a mercy. A man who hears a parable and does not understand it has not yet heard the full truth plainly and rejected it. A man who rejects the plain truth is in more danger than a man who heard only a story. And a story stays in the memory. Many people who walked away puzzled that day may have remembered the sower years later, after the resurrection, and finally understood. God's judgment is never without His mercy close behind.

Fulfilling the Psalm

Matthew adds one more reason. After a string of parables, he writes that Jesus spoke this way "so that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled" (Matthew 13:35), and he quotes Psalm 78:2.

> *I will open my mouth in a parable; I will pour forth riddles from of old* (Psalm 78:2)

Psalm 78 is a long poem by Asaph that retells Israel's history, from the Exodus to King David, as a warning to the next generation not to be stubborn like their fathers. Asaph calls his history lesson a parable, a *mashal*. Matthew saw that Jesus was doing the same thing on a deeper level. He was bringing out "things hidden from ***the*** foundation of ***the*** world" (Matthew 13:35), the secrets of God's kingdom that had been planned from the beginning and were now being made known.

That is what Jesus means when He talks about "the mysteries of the kingdom" (Matthew 13:11). In the Bible, a mystery is not a puzzle that can be solved with enough cleverness. It is a truth that God kept hidden in the past and has now revealed. The parables reveal mysteries about the kingdom that the Old Testament did not spell out: that the kingdom would come first quietly, like seed in the ground, before it

comes in power; that good and evil would grow side by side for a time; and that the King Himself would be rejected before He reigns.

Why Stories Work

Beyond all of that, there is a simple reason Jesus told stories. People remember them.

Most of us cannot remember a single sentence from the last sermon we heard. But almost everyone can tell you the story of the prodigal son. A story slips past our defenses. We relax when someone says, "A certain man had two sons" (Luke 15:11). We let our guard down. We start to care about the characters. And by the time the story turns and points at us, it is already inside.

Jesus also chose His pictures from the everyday world of the people He was talking to: farming, fishing, baking, sheep, weddings, wages, debts, and family fights over money. Every time those listeners planted seed, kneaded dough, or lit a lamp, they would think again about what He said. He built His teaching into their daily lives so they could not get away from it.

That is still true today. Most of us are not farmers, but we know what it is to work hard and see nothing come of it, to lose something precious, to be passed over, to forgive or refuse to forgive. Jesus' stories still reach us right where we live.

Ears to Hear

Several times after a parable, Jesus called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:9). Everyone in the crowd had ears. Jesus was talking about a different kind of hearing: the kind that listens to obey.

In Mark's account, right after explaining the sower, Jesus added a warning: "Take heed what you hear" (Mark 4:24). Luke puts it a little differently: "Therefore watch how you hear" (Luke 8:18). We need both. We need to watch what we listen to, and we need to watch how we listen. A person can sit in church for fifty years and never truly hear.

So before you go on in this book, it is worth stopping to ask God for ears to hear. Not just to learn some interesting facts about first century farming, but to hear what Jesus is saying to you.

Study Questions

1. Read Matthew 13:10-17. In your own words, why did Jesus say He spoke in parables?
2. The disciples did not understand the sower at first either. What did they do that the crowd did not do? How can you do the same thing today?
3. What does "whoever has, to him will be given" (Matthew 13:12) mean in the context of hearing God's word?
4. How can the same parable be both a judgment and a mercy?
5. What does it look like in your life to have "ears to hear"? What gets in the way of hearing Jesus clearly?

Chapter 3: How to Read a Parable

> *And He says to them, "Do you not know this parable? And how will you know all the parables?"*
>
> Mark 4:13 (SLB)

After the parable of the sower, Jesus asked His disciples a question that should encourage every Bible reader who has ever felt slow: "Do you not know this parable? And how will you know all the parables?" (Mark 4:13). The sower was a kind of key. If they could learn to read that one, they could learn to read the rest. Then He walked them through it, piece by piece.

That tells us two things. First, parables are not always obvious, even to people who love Jesus. Second, they can be understood. Jesus did not leave His followers guessing. He taught them how to read.

How the Church Has Read the Parables

For much of church history, the parables were read as detailed allegories. Every person, object, and number in the story was thought to stand for something spiritual, and teachers competed to find the deepest hidden meanings.

Behind the Story: Augustine and the good Samaritan (*Background*)

The most famous example comes from Augustine (A.D. 354 to 430), one of the greatest teachers in church history. In a work on questions from the Gospels, he explained the good Samaritan as a picture of the whole story of salvation. As it is usually summarized, the man going down from Jerusalem is Adam; Jerusalem is the heavenly city; Jericho stands for our mortality; the robbers are the devil and his angels; the priest and Levite are the Old Testament law and prophets, which could not save; the Samaritan is Christ; the inn is the church; and the innkeeper is the apostle Paul. I have given this from standard summaries, because I could not open the Latin text or a full translation to check it myself.

Everything in that reading is true as theology. Christ really is our rescuer. But almost none of it is what Jesus was talking about. He told the story to answer a lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" and He ended it with a command: "Go, and you do likewise" (Luke 10:37). An allegory that skips the command has missed the point.

In 1888 a German scholar named Adolf Jülicher reacted against all of this. He argued that each parable makes only one point, and that the details are just there to make the story work. Later scholars like C. H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias in the twentieth century tried to read the parables in the setting of Jesus' own ministry, as His announcement that the kingdom of God was breaking in.

Jülicher helped the church get away from wild allegory, but he went too far the other way. Jesus Himself explained the sower and the wheat and weeds by telling what several details meant. In the parable of the wicked tenants, the chief priests understood right away that the tenants stood for them (Matthew 21:45). So some details do carry meaning. Many careful teachers today, such as Craig Blomberg, suggest that a parable often makes one main point for each main character, which usually means one to three points. That is a good rule of thumb, as long as we hold it loosely.

Eight Questions to Ask of Any Parable

Here is the simple approach I use in this book. You can use it on any parable.

1. **Does Jesus or the Gospel writer explain it?** Start there. Jesus explained the sower, the wheat and the weeds, and the net. Luke often tells us the point before the story begins: "And He was also speaking a parable to them about its being necessary always to pray and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1). When the Bible gives us the meaning, we do not need to hunt for another one.
2. **Who was listening?** A parable told to grumbling Pharisees will land differently than one told to the disciples in private. The three lost-and-found parables in Luke 15 make full sense only when you remember who was in the audience: tax collectors and sinners drawing near to hear Him, and Pharisees and scribes complaining about it (Luke 15:1-2).
3. **What prompted it?** A question, a complaint, a request, or an event. Look just before the parable.
4. **What would a first century listener have known?** What a denarius was worth, how sheep were kept, how people felt about Samaritans or tax collectors. The **Behind the Story** boxes in this book help here.
5. **Where is the surprise?** Almost every story parable has a twist that the first hearers would not have expected. The hero is a Samaritan. The father runs. The workers hired last get paid first and the same. The surprise is usually where the point is.
6. **Who are the main characters, and what does each one show?** Usually there are one, two, or three. In the prodigal son, the father, the younger son, and the older son each teach something.
7. **What does the parable ask the hearer to do or decide?** Every parable calls for a response.
8. **Does my reading agree with the plain teaching of the rest of Scripture?** A parable should never be used to build a doctrine that clear passages do not teach. Parables illustrate and drive home truth. They are not the place to start a new belief.

Mistakes to Avoid

Over the years I have seen a few mistakes come up again and again in Bible studies. Here are the most common ones.

Making every detail mean something. The innkeeper in the good Samaritan does not need to be the apostle Paul. The two coins the Samaritan gave him do not need to be the two sacraments, or the two testaments. They are just the price of a few nights' stay. When you notice yourself reaching, stop.

Ignoring the setting. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard has been preached as a lesson on fair wages. It is not. It is about God's grace, and it answers Peter's question, "What then will there be for us?" (Matthew 19:27).

Pressing the story too far. In the parable of the persistent widow, God is compared to an unjust judge. Jesus is not saying God is unjust. He is arguing from the lesser to the greater: if even a bad judge will finally give a widow justice, how much more will God, who loves His people (Luke 18:6-8). Many parables use this how-much-more logic. The point is the contrast, not the comparison.

Taking a detail as a rule for daily life. The shrewd manager in Luke 16 cheats his master, and the master praises him. Jesus is not telling us to cheat. He is praising the manager's foresight, not his honesty.

Reading our own world into theirs. We tend to picture the ten virgins at a wedding like ours. A first century Jewish wedding was very different, and the details matter.

A Word About the Gospel of Thomas

If you study the parables for very long, you will run into the so-called Gospel of Thomas.

> **Behind the Story: The Gospel of Thomas** (*Disputed*)
>
> In 1945, farmers near the town of Nag Hammadi in Egypt dug up a jar holding a collection of ancient books written in Coptic, a late form of the Egyptian language. One of them was a list of 114 sayings credited to Jesus, called the Gospel of Thomas. It has no story of Jesus' life, death, or resurrection, only sayings. Several of them are versions of parables we know from the Bible, including the sower, the mustard seed, the leaven, the hidden treasure, the pearl, the net, the lost sheep, the rich fool, the great banquet, and the wicked tenants. Greek fragments of the same work had been found earlier at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt.
>
> Scholars disagree sharply about its date. Most place it in the second century, after the four Gospels, and many think it borrowed from them. A smaller group argues that parts of it are early and independent. Many of its sayings show the ideas of a second century movement called Gnosticism, which taught that salvation comes through secret knowledge. The early church did not accept it as Scripture. I have not quoted it in this book, and I do not use it to explain any parable. I mention it only so that you know what it is when you hear it named.

Reading With the Right Heart

The best tools in the world will not help if we come to the parables with the wrong heart. The Pharisees knew the Scriptures far better than most of us. They heard the parables firsthand from the lips of Jesus. And many of them understood enough to be offended and not enough to repent.

So as we go through these stories, I want to encourage you to read them three ways. Read them as a student, asking what Jesus meant. Read them as a worshiper, asking what they show you about God. And read them as a sinner, asking where you are in the story. Usually, if you are honest, you will find yourself in a place you did not expect.

Study Questions

1. Why is it a problem to treat every detail of a parable as a secret code? Can you think of an example?
2. Read Luke 15:1-2 and then Luke 18:1 and 18:9. How does knowing the audience or the stated purpose change how you read the parables that follow?
3. What is "how much more" reasoning? Find an example of it in Matthew 7:9-11.
4. Of the eight questions in this chapter, which one do you think you skip most often when reading the Bible?
5. Why is it dangerous to build a new doctrine on a detail in a parable?

Part Two: Parables in Galilee

Chapter 4: Word Pictures From the Sermon on the Mount

> *Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock.*
>
> Matthew 7:24 (SLB)

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' best known teaching, and most of it is plain command: do not be angry, do not lust, love your enemies, do not worry. But it is also full of pictures. Salt, light, a lamp, a speck of sawdust, a log, a loaf of bread, a fruit tree, and two houses in a storm. These short parables are where many of us first met the way Jesus taught.

Matthew tells us who was listening. When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain, and His disciples came to Him, and He taught them (Matthew 5:1-2). By the end, the crowds were listening too, and they "were astonished at His teaching; for He was teaching them as ***one*** having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:28-29). Luke records a similar sermon given on a level place, with a great crowd from all over Judea and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon (Luke 6:17). Jesus surely taught these things more than once, in more than one place, which helps explain why the wording in Matthew and Luke is not always the same.

Most of my week is spent at work, not behind a pulpit. Work is where being salt and light actually gets tested, when schedules slip and tempers run short. Staying quiet to avoid standing out is always the easy way. Daily work is the main place Jesus expects His people to make a steady difference.

1. Salt of the Earth

Where to read it: Matthew 5:13; Mark 9:49-50; Luke 14:34-35
Who heard it: The disciples, with the crowds listening
What prompted it: Teaching on the mountain after the Beatitudes

Right after promising blessing to those who are persecuted for His sake, Jesus told His followers what they were.

> *You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt becomes tasteless, with what will it be salted? It is no longer strong for anything, except to be thrown out and to be trampled by men.*
> (Matthew 5:13)

Salt did several jobs in the ancient world. It gave flavor. It kept meat and fish from rotting in a world with no refrigerators. It was offered with the sacrifices in the temple (Leviticus 2:13). And it was valuable enough to be traded and carried long distances.

Behind the Story: Salt that loses its saltiness (*Background*)

Pure salt, sodium chloride, cannot lose its taste. But much of the salt used in Israel in Jesus' day was gathered from the shores and marshes around the Dead Sea, and it was mixed with other minerals. If the mixture got

damp, the real salt could dissolve and wash out, leaving a gray crust that looked like salt but had no taste at all. That leftover was useless. It could not even be put on a field or a manure pile, as Luke's version says (Luke 14:35). This is the usual explanation given in Bible dictionaries, though we cannot be sure it is exactly what Jesus had in mind.

What it means: A Christian's job is to make a difference by being different. Salt does its work by being in contact with the meat and by being salty. If we keep away from the world, we do no good. If we become just like the world, we do no good either. Jesus' warning is that a disciple who has lost what makes him different is not worth much to anyone. Mark adds, "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another" (Mark 9:50).

2. The Light of the World and the Lamp on the Stand

Where to read it: Matthew 5:14-16; Mark 4:21-22; Luke 8:16-17; 11:33
Who heard it: The disciples, with the crowds listening; later the crowd by the sea
What prompted it: Teaching on the mountain; repeated after the parable of the sower

In the next breath Jesus gave a second picture.

> *You are the light of the world. A city lying on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under the basket, but on the lampstand, and it shines for all who **are** in the house. Thus let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and may glorify your Father who **is** in the heavens.* (Matthew 5:14-16)

Houses in a Galilean village usually had one main room. A small clay lamp, filled with olive oil and burning a wick of flax, sat on a lampstand or a shelf in the wall so its little light could fill the whole room. No one would light it and then cover it with a basket. That would be foolish, and it would also put the flame out.

Jesus later used the same picture in a different way, right after explaining the parable of the sower (Mark 4:21-22; Luke 8:16-17). There the point was that what He was teaching in parables would not stay hidden forever. Truth that is hidden for a time is meant to come out into the open.

What it means: Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12), and His people shine with His light, the way the moon shines with the light of the sun. Notice the goal: that people would see our good works and "glorify your Father who ***is*** in the heavens" (Matthew 5:16). The point is not that people would admire us, but that they would praise Him.

3. The Lamp of the Body

Where to read it: Matthew 6:22-23; Luke 11:34-36
Who heard it: The disciples, with the crowds listening
What prompted it: Teaching about treasure on earth and in heaven

In the middle of His teaching about money, Jesus said that the eye is the lamp of the body. If the eye is healthy, the whole body is full of light. If it is bad, the whole body is full of darkness. "Therefore if the light that ***is*** in you is darkness, how great ***is*** the darkness!" (Matthew 6:23).

The setting matters. Just before this, Jesus told His hearers not to store up treasure on earth, "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). Just after it, He said no one can serve God and money (Matthew 6:24). In Jewish speech of that time, an evil eye often meant a stingy, greedy eye, and a good eye meant a generous one. Proverbs 22:9 says, "One good of eye, he will be blessed, for he gives from his bread to the poor."

What it means: What we fix our eyes on fills our whole life. A person whose eyes are always on getting more will find that greed darkens everything. A person whose eye is generous and fixed on God will find his whole life full of light.

4. The Speck and the Log

Where to read it: Matthew 7:3-5; Luke 6:41-42
Who heard it: The disciples, with the crowds listening
What prompted it: Teaching on judging others

This is one of the funniest pictures Jesus ever drew, and I think He meant it to be. A man has a log, a big wooden beam like the ones that hold up a roof, sticking out of his own eye. And he is leaning in close to his brother, squinting, trying to pick a tiny speck of sawdust out of his brother's eye.

> *Hypocrite! First cast out the beam from your eye, and then you will see clearly to cast out the splinter from the eye of your brother.* (Matthew 7:5)

Jesus had been a carpenter. He knew all about sawdust and beams.

What it means: Notice that Jesus does not say we should never help a brother with his speck. He says we should first deal with our own log, "and then you will see clearly." The problem is not correction. The problem is hypocrisy. The person who has honestly faced his own sin is the person God can use to help others with theirs, and he will do it gently, because he knows what it is like to have something in his eye.

5. The Blind Leading the Blind

Where to read it: Luke 6:39-40; Matthew 15:12-14
Who heard it: The disciples and the crowd; later the disciples, about the Pharisees
What prompted it: Teaching on judging; later, after the Pharisees took offense

Luke tells us this was a parable. "A blind ***man*** is not able to lead a blind ***man***, is he? Will they not both fall into a pit?" (Luke 6:39). Then Jesus added that a disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40). In Matthew, Jesus used the same picture to describe the Pharisees, after they were offended by His teaching about what makes a person unclean (Matthew 15:14).

What it means: Be careful who you follow, because you will become like them. And be careful about leading others before you can see. A teacher who does not know the way cannot help anyone find it.

6. The Father's Good Gifts

Where to read it: Matthew 7:9-11; Luke 11:11-13
Who heard it: The disciples, with the crowds listening; in Luke, the disciples after they asked Him to teach them to pray
What prompted it: Teaching on asking, seeking, and knocking

Jesus asked a simple question. If your son asks for bread, will you hand him a stone? If he asks for a fish, will you hand him a snake? Of course not. Even sinful parents know how to give good things to their children.

> *If you then, being evil, know **how** to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who **is** in the heavens give good things to those who ask Him?* (Matthew 7:11)

In Luke's version, the good gift is named: the Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him (Luke 11:13).

What it means: This is the how-much-more logic we talked about in Chapter 3. Jesus does not say God is like a human father. He says God is far better. If even flawed parents care for their children, we can trust our perfect Father with our prayers. He may not give us what we ask for every time, any more than a good father gives a child everything he asks for. But He will never give us a stone when we need bread.

7. Trees and Their Fruit

Where to read it: Matthew 7:15-20; 12:33-35; Luke 6:43-45
Who heard it: The disciples and the crowds; later the Pharisees
What prompted it: Warning about false prophets; later, after the Pharisees said He cast out demons by Beelzebul

A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. No one gathers grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles. "So then, by their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:20).

Jesus used this picture first as a warning about false prophets, who come in sheep's clothing but inside are ravenous wolves (Matthew 7:15). Later He turned it on the Pharisees who had just called the work of the Holy Spirit the work of the devil (Matthew 12:33-35). Luke adds the root of it all: "for out of the overflow of the heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45).

What it means: What is inside always comes out. A person's words and actions over time show what is in his heart. That is a test for the teachers we listen to, and it is a test for us. You cannot fix the fruit by gluing apples on a dead tree. The tree itself has to be made new.

8. The Wise and Foolish Builders

Where to read it: Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49
Who heard it: The disciples and the crowds
What prompted it: The closing words of the Sermon on the Mount

Jesus ended His great sermon with a story about two men who built houses. One built on rock. The other built on sand. For a while, there was no difference. Both houses looked fine. Then the storm came.

> *Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain came down, and the torrents came, and the winds blew, and they fell against that house; and it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not do them will be likened to a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain came down, and the torrents came, and the winds blew, and they struck against that house; and it fell, and its fall was great.* (Matthew 7:24-27)

Luke adds that the wise man "dug and went deep, and laid a foundation on the rock" (Luke 6:48). That takes more work. It is slower. It is the kind of thing no one sees once the house is built.

Behind the Story: Floods in a dry land (*Background*)

Much of the land of Israel is dry for most of the year. Riverbeds called wadis lie empty all summer and look like a flat, sandy place to build. But when the winter rains come, water from the hills can pour down those dry beds in a sudden flash flood, sweeping away anything in its path. A house built on the sandy floor of a wadi might stand for months and then vanish in a single night. Jesus' first hearers would have known exactly what He meant.

What it means: The difference between the two builders is not what they heard. Both of them heard Jesus' words. The difference is that one of them did them and the other did not. That is how Jesus chose to end the Sermon on the Mount: not with a summary of what He said, but with a warning to do it. The storm in the story points to the hard times of life, and finally to the day of judgment. Only a life built on Jesus and His words will stand.

9. Settle With Your Opponent on the Way

Where to read it: Matthew 5:25-26; Luke 12:57-59
Who heard it: The disciples and the crowds; later a great crowd
What prompted it: Teaching on anger and making things right; later, after warning the crowd that they could not read the signs of the times

Jesus told His hearers to make friends quickly with an opponent while they were still on the way to court with him, before the judge handed them over to the officer and they were thrown into prison. "Truly I say to you, you will by no means come out from there until you pay the last quadrans" (Matthew 5:26).

In Matthew, the point is to make things right with people quickly, before anger and offense do more damage (Matthew 5:23-24). In Luke, Jesus uses the same picture to warn the crowds that they were on their way to God's judgment and needed to settle their case with God while there was still time (Luke 12:56-59).

What it means: Don't wait. Whether it is a broken relationship with a brother or an unsettled account with God, the time to deal with it is now, on the way, before you reach the judge.

Hearing and Doing

Look back over these pictures and you will see one theme running through them. Salt that has lost its taste. A light under a basket. An eye full of darkness. A man who preaches about specks with a log in his

eye. A tree that looks fine but bears bad fruit. A house that looks fine until the storm. Every one of them is about the difference between what something seems to be and what it really is.

Jesus was not impressed by religious appearances. He was looking for real salt, real light, and real fruit. And He knew that the only way to have them is to hear His words and do them.

Study Questions

1. Where in your daily life do you have the most opportunity to be “salt” and “light”? What might keep you from it?
2. Read Matthew 6:19-24. How does the picture of the lamp of the body fit between the teaching on treasure and the teaching on serving two masters?
3. What is the difference between helping a brother with his speck and being a hypocrite? How can you tell which one you are doing?
4. Jesus says we will know false teachers by their fruit. What kinds of fruit should we look for?
5. Both builders heard the same words. What is one thing Jesus has said that you have heard many times but have not yet done?

Chapter 5: Short Answers to His Critics

> *And having heard, Jesus says to them, "Those who are strong have no need of a physician, but those who are ill. I did not come to call **the** righteous, but sinners to repentance."*
>
> Mark 2:17 (SLB)

From the start of His ministry in Galilee, Jesus had critics. Some were sincere and confused. Others had made up their minds against Him early. Either way, they kept asking the same kinds of questions. Why do You eat with sinners? Why don't Your disciples fast? By what power do You cast out demons?

Jesus often answered with a quick parable, a picture so plain that it could not be argued with. This chapter gathers those short answers. They are some of the least known parables in the Gospels, but they tell us a great deal about who Jesus thought He was.

10. The Physician and the Sick

Where to read it: Matthew 9:10-13; Mark 2:15-17; Luke 5:29-32
Who heard it: The scribes and Pharisees, with tax collectors, sinners, and the disciples present
What prompted it: The Pharisees complained that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners at Levi's house

Levi, also called Matthew, was a tax collector at Capernaum. When Jesus called him, he left his tax booth and threw a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and he invited his friends. His friends were what you would expect a tax collector's friends to be: other tax collectors and people the religious world called sinners (Luke 5:29). The Pharisees were scandalized and asked the disciples why their Teacher ate with people like that.

Jesus heard them and answered with a one-sentence parable: "Those who are strong have no need of a physician, but those who are ill. I did not come to call ***the*** righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Mark 2:17). In Matthew's account, He also sent them back to their Bibles with a quotation from Hosea 6:6: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:13).

Behind the Story: Tax collectors (*Text confirmed*)
In Galilee in Jesus' day, Herod Antipas ruled under Rome, and the right to collect tolls and taxes was usually sold to local men who paid in advance and then collected what they could, keeping the difference. A tax collector was seen as a traitor who worked for foreign or ungodly rulers and grew rich off his neighbors. Devout Jews counted them with prostitutes and other open sinners (Matthew 21:31). Josephus names "John the publican," the old English word for a tax collector, among "the great men of the Jews" at Caesarea just before the Jewish war (The Jewish War 2.14.4), which shows that such men could be powerful and well known.

What it means: A doctor who refuses to go near sick people is not a good doctor. Jesus did not come to stay clean by keeping away from sinners. He came to heal them. There is a gentle sting in His words too. The Pharisees thought they were the healthy ones who did not need Him. In fact, every one of us is sick. The only question is whether we know it.

11. The Bridegroom's Friends

Where to read it: Matthew 9:14-15; Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-35
Who heard it: The disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees
What prompted it: They asked why Jesus' disciples did not fast as they did

Devout Jews in Jesus' day fasted often. Some Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12), and John the Baptist's disciples fasted as well. People wanted to know why Jesus' disciples did not.

Jesus answered with a picture from a wedding. "The sons of the bridechamber are not able to fast while the bridegroom is with them, are they?" (Mark 2:19). The "sons of the bridechamber" were the groom's close friends, who helped with the wedding and celebrated with him for days. A Jewish wedding feast could go on for a week. Nobody fasted at a wedding. It would be an insult to the groom.

Then Jesus added something ominous. "But days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days" (Mark 2:20).

What it means: This little parable is a big claim. In the Old Testament, God Himself is the bridegroom of His people (Isaiah 54:5; 62:5; Hosea 2:19-20). Jesus calls Himself the bridegroom. His coming is a time for joy, not mourning. But He also hints, very early in His ministry, that He will be "taken away." The cross is already in view.

12. New Cloth on an Old Garment

Where to read it: Matthew 9:16; Mark 2:21; Luke 5:36
Who heard it: The disciples of John and the Pharisees
What prompted it: Same question about fasting

Jesus kept going. No one sews a patch of new, unshrunk cloth onto an old garment. The first time the garment gets washed, the new patch shrinks, pulls away, and makes the tear worse than before (Mark 2:21). Luke's version adds another problem: if you cut a patch from a new garment, you ruin the new one, and the patch does not match the old one anyway (Luke 5:36).

13. New Wine in Old Wineskins

Where to read it: Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37-39
Who heard it: The disciples of John and the Pharisees
What prompted it: Same question about fasting

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins.

Behind the Story: Wineskins (*Background*)

In Bible times, wine was often stored in skins, usually from a goat, sewn up with the hair inside or out and sealed at the neck. A new skin was soft and could stretch. New wine was still fermenting and giving off gas, so it swelled. An old skin had already been stretched and had grown hard and brittle. If new wine went into it, the skin would split, and both the wine and the skin would be lost.

> *And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; but if not, the new wine bursts the wineskins, and the wine is poured out, and the wineskins will perish; but new wine must be put into new wineskins.* (Mark 2:22)

Only Luke adds one more line, and it is a sad one. "And no one having drunk old ***wine*** immediately desires new; for he says, 'The old is better.'" (Luke 5:39).

What the two pictures mean together: What Jesus brought could not just be added on to the old system of religion as a patch. It was something new, alive, and growing, and it needed a new container. This does not mean the Old Testament was bad. Jesus came to fulfill the Law, not to destroy it (Matthew 5:17). But the traditions that had grown up around it, like the extra fasts the Pharisees kept, could not hold what He was doing. And Luke's last line is a warning about human nature. Many people prefer the old wine. They are comfortable with the religion they have and do not want anything new, even if it is from God.

14. Children in the Marketplace

Where to read it: Matthew 11:16-19; Luke 7:31-35
Who heard it: The crowds
What prompted it: After the messengers from John the Baptist left, Jesus spoke about John and about that generation

Jesus asked what He could compare His generation to. Then He painted a picture everyone had seen: children sitting in the marketplace, calling to each other in a game of pretend.

> *But to what will I compare this generation? It is like little children sitting in markets and calling to their companions, and saying, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge to you, and you did not mourn.'* (Matthew 11:16-17)

One group of children wanted to play wedding, so they played the flute, and the others would not dance. So they tried playing funeral, and sang a dirge, and the others would not mourn. Nothing pleased them.

Jesus explained what He meant. John the Baptist came living a hard, simple life in the wilderness, "and they say, 'He has a demon.'" Jesus came eating and drinking with people, and they said, "Look, a man ***who is*** a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (Matthew 11:18-19).

What it means: Some people will find a reason to reject God's messenger no matter what. If he is strict, he is a fanatic. If he is warm and joyful, he is worldly. The real problem was not John's style or Jesus' style. The real problem was that the people did not want to repent. But Jesus ends with hope: "wisdom was justified by her children" (Matthew 11:19). In time, the results show who was right.

15. The Two Debtors

Where to read it: Luke 7:36-50
Who heard it: Simon the Pharisee and his dinner guests, with a sinful woman present
What prompted it: A woman known as a sinner anointed Jesus' feet, and Simon judged them both in his heart

A Pharisee named Simon invited Jesus to dinner. While they reclined at the table, a woman from the town who was known as a sinner came in with an alabaster jar of fragrant oil. She stood behind Jesus at His feet, weeping, and began to wet His feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair, and she kissed His feet and anointed them.

Simon said nothing out loud, but he thought, "This man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what sort of woman this is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39). Jesus answered his thought.

> *"There were two debtors to a certain creditor: the one was owing five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he graciously forgave both. Which of them therefore, tell* ***Me****, will love him more?" And answering, Simon said, "I suppose that* ***it is he*** *to whom he graciously forgave the more." And He said to him, "You have judged rightly."*
> (Luke 7:41-43)

Behind the Story: The denarius (*Background*)
The denarius was a Roman silver coin. In the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, a landowner agrees to pay his workers a denarius for a day's work (Matthew 20:2), and that is the usual way Bible dictionaries explain its value: about one day's pay for a working man. So the first debtor owed something like a year and a half of wages, and the second owed less than two months'. Neither could pay.

Then Jesus turned and looked at the woman, and spoke to Simon. You gave Me no water for My feet, He said, but she washed them with her tears. You gave Me no kiss, but she has not stopped kissing My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with fragrant oil. "For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he to whom little is forgiven loves little" (Luke 7:47).

What it means: The woman's love did not earn her forgiveness. In the parable, the creditor forgave first, and the love came after. Jesus' last words to her make that clear: "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:50). Her love was the proof that she knew she had been forgiven much. The sting of the parable is for Simon. He thought he owed God very little, and so he loved very little. Notice that both debtors in the story were bankrupt. Fifty denarii or five hundred, neither one could pay. Simon's problem was not that he was a smaller sinner. It was that he did not know he was a sinner at all.

16. A Kingdom Divided

Where to read it: Matthew 12:22-26; Mark 3:22-26; Luke 11:14-18
Who heard it: The scribes from Jerusalem and the Pharisees, with the crowds
What prompted it: They said He cast out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons

After Jesus healed a man who was blind and mute because of a demon, the crowds began to wonder if He was the Son of David, the promised Messiah. The Pharisees and the scribes who had come down from

Jerusalem had another explanation. “He has Beelzebul,” they said, and “By the ruler of the demons He casts out the demons” (Mark 3:22).

Mark says Jesus called them over and “was speaking to them in parables” (Mark 3:23). How can Satan cast out Satan? A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. A house divided against itself cannot stand. If Satan were fighting against his own demons, his kingdom would be finished (Mark 3:24-26).

What it means: The charge made no sense. Satan does not work against himself. If demons were being driven out, then a power greater than Satan’s was at work. “But if I cast out the demons by ***the*** Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matthew 12:28).

17. Binding the Strong Man

Where to read it: Matthew 12:29; Mark 3:27; Luke 11:21-23
Who heard it: The scribes and Pharisees, with the crowds
What prompted it: Same accusation

Then Jesus told the second half of the answer.

> *No one is able, having entered into the house of the strong man, to plunder his goods unless he first binds the strong man; and then he will plunder his house.* (Mark 3:27)

Luke’s version makes the picture even stronger. The strong man is fully armed and guards his own palace, and his goods are safe, until someone stronger comes, overpowers him, takes away the armor he trusted in, and divides up the spoil (Luke 11:21-22).

What it means: The strong man is Satan. His house is this world, and his goods are the people he holds captive. Jesus is the Stronger One who has come into Satan’s house, tied him up, and is carrying off his captives one by one, every time He casts out a demon or sets a sinner free. This is what Jesus came to do. As John wrote, “For this ***purpose*** the Son of God was revealed, so that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). The full and final binding of Satan is still to come (Revelation 20:1-3), but the battle was decided when Jesus came. Then Jesus drew a line: “The one who is not with Me is against Me” (Luke 11:23). There is no neutral ground.

18. The Unclean Spirit Returns

Where to read it: Matthew 12:43-45; Luke 11:24-26
Who heard it: The scribes and Pharisees, with the crowds
What prompted it: Same occasion, after some asked Him for a sign

Jesus finished with a strange and frightening picture. An unclean spirit leaves a man and wanders through dry places, looking for rest and finding none. So it decides to go back to the house it came from. It finds the house empty, swept clean, and put in order. So it goes and brings back seven other spirits worse than itself, and they all move in. “And the last ***state*** of that man becomes worse than the first” (Matthew 12:45).

Matthew adds one line that tells us what the parable is about: “So it will be also with this evil generation” (Matthew 12:45).

What it means: Cleaning up your life is not the same as being saved. A house can be swept and tidy and still be empty. The people of Jesus' day had seen great things: John's call to repentance and Jesus' miracles. Many had made outward changes. But they had not let the Stronger One move in. An empty house is an open invitation. The only safe heart is a heart where Jesus lives.

Study Questions

1. Jesus called Himself a physician who came for the sick. Why is it hard for religious people to admit they are sick?
2. What do the pictures of the patch and the wineskins teach about trying to fit Jesus into a life or a religion that we do not want to change?
3. Read Luke 7:36-50. Who do you relate to more in the story, Simon or the woman? Why?
4. How does the parable of the strong man change the way you think about spiritual warfare?
5. What is the danger of a swept and empty life? What fills a life so that it is not empty?

Chapter 6: The Sower and the Soils

> *so My word that goes out from My mouth will be; it will not return to Me empty, unless it has done what I desired, and has prospered **in that for** which I sent it.*
>
> Isaiah 55:11 (SLB)

If you only study one parable in your life, study this one. It is the first parable in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's great collections. It is one of only a few that Jesus explained in detail. And Jesus called it the key to all the rest: "Do you not know this parable? And how will you know all the parables?" (Mark 4:13). The parable of the sower is a parable about hearing, and so it teaches us how to hear every other parable.

19. The Sower and the Four Soils

Where to read it: Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15
Who heard it: A great crowd on the shore of the Sea of Galilee; the explanation was given to the disciples in private
What prompted it: The crowds had grown so large that Jesus taught from a boat; it was the same day the Pharisees accused Him of working by Beelzebul (Matthew 12:22-13:1)

The Setting

It had been a long and hard day. That morning, the Pharisees had accused Jesus of working by the power of the devil. His mother and brothers had come looking for Him, worried about Him (Mark 3:21, 31). Then Jesus went out of the house and sat down beside the Sea of Galilee.

> *And on that day Jesus, having gone out from the house, was sitting beside the sea. And great crowds were gathered together to Him, so that He, having stepped into the boat, sat down; and all the crowd was standing on the shore.* (Matthew 13:1-2)

The northwest shore of the lake has places where the land slopes up from the water like a natural theater, and a voice from a boat just offshore carries well. Picture the scene. Thousands of people on the hillside, and behind them the farm fields of Galilee climbing up the slopes. Some Bible teachers like to imagine that a farmer was out sowing that very afternoon, in plain sight. We cannot know that. But Jesus did not need to point. Every person on that shore had watched a sower at work, and most of them had been one.

The Story

> *And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Look, the sower went out to sow. And while he was sowing, some fell along the road, and the birds came and devoured them. And others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because of not having depth of soil. And the sun having risen, they were scorched; and because of not having root, they withered. And others fell on the thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. And others fell on the good soil and were giving fruit, some a hundredfold, and some sixty, and some thirty. The one having ears to hear, let him hear."* (Matthew 13:3-9)

On the surface, there is nothing unusual about this story. A farmer walks across his field with a bag of seed slung over his shoulder and scatters it by hand in wide arcs. Some of it lands where he does not want it to. That happens to every farmer.

Behind the Story: How seed was sown (*Background*)

In the land of Israel, grain was usually sown by hand after the first autumn rains softened the ground. The sower walked his field throwing seed in wide arcs, which meant some seed always landed outside the good ground. Fields were not fenced, and footpaths often ran along their edges or straight across them, packed hard by the feet of people and animals. Much of Galilee has a layer of limestone bedrock close to the surface, covered by only a few inches of soil, which is why seed could spring up fast and then wither. Scholars still debate whether farmers in Jesus' day usually plowed before sowing, after sowing, or both. Either way, the four kinds of ground Jesus describes are exactly what a farmer in Galilee would see.

The surprise comes at the end. The good soil does not produce an ordinary crop. It produces "some a hundredfold, and some sixty, and some thirty." That is a harvest to make a farmer shout.

Behind the Story: A hundredfold (*Text confirmed*)

How big is a hundredfold? Pliny the Elder, a Roman writer who died in A.D. 79 in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, wrote a huge work called *Natural History*. In his book on farming, he says, "Nothing is more prolific than wheat," and that on the best soil, in the Byzacium plain in North Africa, a peck of seed "produces a yield of 150 pecks" (Natural History 18.21, Rackham translation). Pliny treats that as one of the wonders of the world's best farmland, and he adds that a governor of that region once sent the emperor Augustus "a parcel of very nearly 400 shoots obtained from a single grain as seed," which he calls "almost incredible."

Pliny's numbers come from the richest grain land in the Roman Empire, and modern scholars argue over how to compare them with an ordinary field in Galilee. Many estimate that a normal yield there was far lower. Either way, the point stands. A hundredfold was a bumper crop, the kind of harvest people talked about. Isaac's crop of a hundredfold in Genesis 26:12 is told as a sign of God's blessing.

The Disciples Ask

When the crowd had gone and Jesus was alone, the Twelve and the others around Him asked about the parable (Mark 4:10). That is where Jesus gave the answer we looked at in Chapter 2 about why He taught in parables. Then He explained this one.

> *You, therefore, hear the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand, the evil **one** comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the **one** sown along the road. And the **one** sown on the rocky places, this is the **one** hearing the word and immediately receiving it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but is temporary; and when tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, immediately he is caused to stumble. And the **one** sown among the thorns, this is the **one** hearing the word, and the care of this age and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. And the **one** sown on the good soil, this is the **one** hearing the word and understanding, who indeed bears fruit and produces, some a hundredfold, and some sixty, and some thirty.*
> (Matthew 13:18-23)

Mark and Luke both add a detail that makes everything else fall into place. “The sower sows the word” (Mark 4:14). “The seed is the word of God” (Luke 8:11). The seed is the same in every case. The sower is the same. Only the soil is different.

The Hard Path

The first kind of ground is the path, packed hard by feet. Seed lands on top and just sits there, and the birds swoop down and eat it.

Jesus says this is the person who “hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand.” Before it can sink in at all, “the evil ***one*** comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart” (Matthew 13:19). Luke adds why Satan does it: “so that they may not, having believed, be saved” (Luke 8:12).

This is the person who has heard it all before. The gospel hits his mind and bounces off. Maybe he grew up in church and got hard. Maybe he was hurt by religious people. Maybe he has just walked on that path of indifference so many times that the soil is packed like concrete. He hears a sermon and is thinking about lunch before the last prayer. And the enemy is glad to help him forget.

Notice that Jesus names a real enemy here. The devil is busy wherever the word is preached. It is not enough for a preacher to scatter seed. He also needs to pray.

The Rocky Ground

The second kind of ground looks the most promising at first. A thin layer of soil lies over a shelf of rock. The seed sprouts faster here than anywhere else, because the sun warms the shallow soil quickly. For a few days, this part of the field is the greenest. But the roots hit rock and can go no farther, and when the hot sun comes out, the young plants wilt and die.

Jesus says this is “the ***one*** hearing the word and immediately receiving it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but is temporary” (Matthew 13:20-21). When “tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, immediately he is caused to stumble” (Matthew 13:21).

I have seen this many times, and if you have been in church long, you have too. Someone comes to a revival meeting or a youth camp, weeps at the altar, and is on fire for God for a month. Everyone is excited. And then the pressure comes. His friends laugh at him. His family turns cold. Following Jesus costs something, and he did not count on that. Within a year, he is gone, and he may even be harder than before.

Notice the word “immediately.” It shows up twice. He receives it immediately, and he falls away immediately. Quick, shallow joy is not always a good sign. Real faith goes down before it goes up.

The Thorny Ground

The third kind of ground is the most dangerous, because it looks healthy for the longest time. The soil is deep. The seed sprouts and puts down roots. But the ground was never cleared of the roots of thorn bushes. They come up alongside the grain, grow faster, and steal the light, water, and space. The grain does not die. It just never produces anything.

Jesus names the thorns: “the care of this age and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful” (Matthew 13:22). Mark adds “the desires concerning the other things” (Mark 4:19). Luke adds “pleasures of life” (Luke 8:14).

This is the person most of us are in danger of becoming. He believes. He comes to church. He would never deny Jesus. But his heart is crowded. Worries about money, work, health, and his kids. The pull of nice things and the false promise that a little more money will finally make him feel secure. Entertainment and hobbies that are not wrong in themselves but slowly fill every corner. None of these things kills faith in a day. They just choke it, slowly, until there is no room left to grow.

The deceitfulness of riches is a sobering phrase. Money lies to us. It promises safety, freedom, and happiness, and it never delivers. And the more we have, the louder its promises get.

The Good Soil

The fourth kind of ground is soft, deep, and clean. The seed goes in, roots go down, and the grain grows and produces a crop of thirty, sixty, or a hundred times what was sown.

Each Gospel describes the good soil a little differently, and together they give a full picture. Matthew says this is the one who hears the word “and understanding” (Matthew 13:23). Mark says they “hear the word and receive ***it***” (Mark 4:20). Luke says they hear it “in a noble and good heart, hold ***it*** fast and bear fruit with perseverance” (Luke 8:15).

Hear it. Understand it. Receive it. Hold it fast. Bear fruit. Keep going. That is what it looks like to have ears to hear.

Notice too that not all good soil produces the same amount. Some produce thirty, some sixty, and some a hundred. God does not ask every believer to have the same results. He asks us to be good soil. The harvest is His business.

What the Parable Teaches

It teaches us about God’s word. The seed is good. There is nothing wrong with it. When people do not respond to the gospel, it is not because the message is weak. “So My word that goes out from My mouth will be; it will not return to Me empty” (Isaiah 55:11). It is because of the condition of the heart that hears it.

It teaches us about the work of ministry. This parable must have been a great comfort to the disciples. They had been watching crowds come and go. They had seen the Pharisees turn against Jesus. They may have been wondering whether His mission was failing. Jesus told them: expect most of the seed to fall on hard, rocky, or thorny ground. That is normal. But keep sowing, because the good soil will produce a harvest beyond anything you can imagine. Anyone who teaches Sunday school, shares the gospel with a coworker, or raises children in the faith needs to hear that. Your job is to sow. Do not lose heart when much of it seems wasted.

It teaches us to examine ourselves. This is the main point. Jesus did not tell this parable so we could sort other people into soils. He told it so each of us would ask what kind of ground he is. And here is the good news hidden in the story: soil can change. A hard path can be broken up. Rocks can be dug out. Thorns can be pulled. The prophet Hosea told Israel, "break up for yourselves fallow ground; and ***it is*** time to seek the LORD" (Hosea 10:12). That is a prayer we can pray for ourselves.

Take Heed How You Hear

Right after the explanation, Mark and Luke both record Jesus' warning about how we listen. In Luke it reads, "Therefore watch how you hear; for whoever has, to him it will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken away from him" (Luke 8:18).

This was not just a story about farmers. It was a story about the very people listening to it on the shore that day, and it is a story about you and me as we read it. Every time we open the Bible or sit under preaching, the seed falls again. What happens next depends on the ground.

Study Questions

1. Read Matthew 13:3-9 and 18-23 side by side. List the four soils and what each one stands for.
2. Why do you think Jesus called this parable the key to understanding all the parables (Mark 4:13)?
3. Which of the thorns Jesus names (cares, riches, desires, pleasures) do you find most often crowding your own heart?
4. What does it look like in practice to "hold fast" to the word (Luke 8:15)?
5. How does this parable encourage someone who has shared the gospel many times and seen little result?
6. Pray Hosea 10:12 for yourself this week. What "fallow ground" in your life needs to be broken up?

Chapter 7: Seeds, Weeds, and Leaven

> *And He was saying, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or in what parable shall we compare it?"*
>
> Mark 4:30 (SLB)

The sower was only the beginning. On that same day by the sea, Jesus told one parable after another about seeds and growth. Matthew 13 gathers seven of them, and Mark 4 adds one that no other Gospel records. Together they answer a question that must have troubled the disciples. If Jesus really was bringing the kingdom of God, why did it look so small? Where was the army? Where was the throne? Why were the Romans still in charge, and why were the religious leaders turning against Him?

Jesus' answer was that the kingdom was coming the way a crop comes: quietly at first, from something small, and growing in ways no one can fully see.

My guitar work and my writing both started small and grew one step at a time. It is easy to look at a slow start and think it barely counts. Steady, unseen growth adds up. God does not despise small beginnings, even when we are impatient for results (Zechariah 4:10).

20. The Seed That Grows by Itself

Where to read it: Mark 4:26-29
Who heard it: The crowd by the sea
What prompted it: One of the parables told on the day of the sower

Only Mark records this parable, and it is easy to miss.

> *And He was saying, "Thus is the kingdom of God: as if a man should cast the seed on the earth, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, how, he himself does not know. For the earth bears fruit by itself: first a blade, then a head, then full grain in the head. But when the fruit permits, immediately he sends the sickle, because the harvest has come."* (Mark 4:26-29)

The farmer in this story does almost nothing. He scatters the seed, and then he goes to bed. He gets up, does his chores, goes to bed again. Day after day. And all the while, under the ground, something is happening that he did not cause and cannot explain. "How, he himself does not know." First a green blade pushes up, then a head forms, then the head fills out with grain. When it is ripe, he picks up his sickle and goes to work.

The Greek word Mark uses for "by itself" is *automatē*, the word our English "automatic" comes from. The ground produces on its own, by the power God has built into it.

What it means: The growth of God's kingdom is God's work. We plant and we harvest, but we do not make anything grow. Paul said the same thing about his own ministry: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing ***it*** to grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6). This takes a huge weight off anyone who serves the Lord.

You cannot make your child believe. You cannot argue your friend into the kingdom. You can sow, you can pray, and you can go to sleep at night trusting God to do what only He can do. And notice the end of the story. The harvest does come. The sickle goes in. God's work in the world has a finish line.

21. The Wheat and the Weeds

Where to read it: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
Who heard it: The crowd by the sea; the explanation was given to the disciples in the house
What prompted it: Told the same day; the disciples asked for the meaning afterward

> *Another parable He set before them, saying, "The kingdom of the heavens has been likened to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while the men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds in the midst of the wheat, and went away. And when the blade sprouted and produced fruit, then the weeds also appeared."* (Matthew 13:24-26)

The servants could not believe it. They had seen their master sow good seed. Where did all these weeds come from? He told them, "A man, an enemy, did this" (Matthew 13:28). They offered to go pull them up. He said no.

> *But he said, 'No, lest while gathering up the weeds you uproot the wheat together with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather up the weeds and bind them into bundles in order to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."'* (Matthew 13:29-30)

Behind the Story: Weeds in the wheat (*Background*)
The Greek word Matthew uses, *zizania*, is usually understood to mean darnel, a kind of ryegrass that grows in grain fields across the Middle East. When it is young, darnel looks so much like wheat that it is very hard to tell the two apart. The difference shows only when the heads form. Darnel seed is also known to be harmful to eat, often because of a fungus that grows on it, so it had to be separated from the wheat after the harvest. Many Bible dictionaries add that the roots of darnel and wheat tangle together in the soil, which would make pulling the weeds early pull up the wheat as well, just as the master warns. Ancient Roman law books are often said to mention sowing weeds in an enemy's field as a crime. I have not opened that text, so I mention it only as something that is often said.

Later, in the house, the disciples asked Jesus to explain it, and He did, point by point.

> *And answering, He said to them, "The **one** sowing the good seed is the Son of Man; and the field is the world; and the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the weeds are the sons of the evil **one**; and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; and the harvest is **the** consummation of the age; and the reapers are angels. Therefore, just as the weeds are gathered up and burned with fire, so it will be at the consummation of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather up out of His kingdom all the stumbling blocks and those who practice lawlessness, and they will throw them into the furnace of the fire; there will be the weeping and the gnashing of the teeth. Then the righteous will shine out like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. The **one** having ears to hear, let him hear."* (Matthew 13:37-43)

What it means: Notice first what the field is. Jesus says, "the field is the world" (Matthew 13:38). It is not the church. This parable is not mainly about whether a church should discipline its members. Other passages teach that clearly (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5). This parable answers a different question: why does God let evil people go on living alongside His people in the world? Why doesn't the Messiah just wipe out the wicked now?

The answer is patience and protection. The master holds back judgment for now because pulling up the weeds early would harm the wheat. God is not slow. He is patient, "not wishing any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). And His people do not always know wheat from weeds as well as they think. Many a "weed" in the eyes of the religious crowd, like a tax collector or a prostitute, turned out to be wheat. Many who looked like wheat did not.

But the harvest is coming. At the end of this age, the Son of Man will send His angels, and there will be a final separation. The wicked will be thrown into "the furnace of the fire," and "the righteous will shine out like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matthew 13:42-43). Jesus speaks of judgment soberly and plainly, and we should too.

Bible-believing teachers who hold the pre-tribulation view, as I do, generally see this harvest as taking place when Jesus returns to the earth at the end of the Tribulation, to judge the nations and set up His kingdom, after the church has already been caught up to be with Him. Chapter 20 says more about the order of those events. However the timing is worked out, the point Jesus makes is the same: the separation is certain, it is coming at the end, and it belongs to Him and His angels, not to us.

22. The Mustard Seed

Where to read it: Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19
Who heard it: The crowd by the sea; later, in Luke, people at a synagogue on the Sabbath
What prompted it: Told the same day as the sower; Luke records it again after Jesus healed a bent-over woman on the Sabbath

> *Another parable He set before them, saying, "The kingdom of the heavens is like a grain of mustard, which a man, having taken, sowed in his field, which indeed is smaller than all the seeds, but when it has grown, it is greater than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the sky come and nest in its branches."* (Matthew 13:31-32)

The mustard seed was famous for being tiny. Jesus used it the same way in another place, when He said that faith the size of a mustard seed could move a mountain (Matthew 17:20). It is "smaller than all the seeds" that a farmer in Israel would plant in his garden. Yet in one season it grows into a plant big enough for birds to sit in.

Behind the Story: Mustard in the Roman world (*Text confirmed*)

Pliny the Elder described mustard in his *Natural History*, written in the A.D. 70s. He praised its "pungent taste and fiery effect" and said, "It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once" (Natural History 19.54, Rackham translation).

Pliny was not writing about the Bible, but his words fit the parable well. Mustard was small, quick, and hard to

stop. The black mustard that grows around the Sea of Galilee can reach eight to ten feet in a single season, which Bible dictionaries usually give as the reason Jesus could call it a tree. Some readers point out that a mustard seed is not the smallest seed in the whole world. That misses the point. Jesus was speaking of the seeds a Galilean farmer sowed, and among those it was the proverbial smallest.

What it means: The kingdom of God started small. A carpenter from Nazareth with twelve ordinary followers, most of them fishermen. By the end of His life on earth, many of those followers had run away. It did not look like much. But from that tiny beginning came a movement that has spread to every nation on earth.

The picture of birds nesting in the branches would have reminded Jesus' listeners of the Old Testament. Great kingdoms were pictured as trees with birds in their branches, like Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom in Daniel 4:12. And God promised that He Himself would plant a sprig on the mountain of Israel that would become "a majestic cedar; and under it shall dwell every bird ***of*** every wing" (Ezekiel 17:23). Many teachers see the birds as the nations coming to find shelter in God's kingdom.

Some teachers read the mustard tree in a darker way. They point out that birds in the parable of the sower stood for the evil one snatching the seed, and they see the oversized tree as a picture of Christendom growing large and worldly, with all kinds of people roosting in it who do not belong to Christ. That view is held by some good Bible teachers, especially in the dispensational tradition. I understand the concern, and church history shows that the visible church has often grown large and worldly. But in this parable, Jesus says the kingdom "is like" the mustard seed, and the whole story moves from small to great. The most natural reading, I believe, is that the parable is good news. I have flagged this for my readers as a place where faithful people differ.

23. The Leaven

Where to read it: Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21
Who heard it: The crowd by the sea; later, in Luke, the same synagogue gathering
What prompted it: Told right after the mustard seed, both times

Right beside the mustard seed, Jesus placed a picture from the kitchen.

> *Another parable He spoke to them: "The kingdom of the heavens is like leaven, which a woman, having taken, hid in approximately 21 quarts (three seahs) of flour until all was leavened."*
> (Matthew 13:33)

Leaven was not the dry yeast we buy in a packet. It was a lump of old dough saved from the last batch, already sour and fermenting. A woman would work it into a new batch of flour, cover it, and leave it. Before long, the whole batch rose.

The amount of flour is surprising. Three seahs is roughly the 20 quarts the SLB gives, enough to make bread for a crowd. That is the same amount Sarah baked when the LORD and two angels visited Abraham (Genesis 18:6). This was not an ordinary family baking day. It was a feast.

What it means: The mustard seed shows the kingdom growing outward in size. The leaven shows it working inward, quietly and from the inside, until it changes everything it touches. You cannot see leaven

working. You just see the results. That is how the gospel works in a person, a family, and a society. It does not come in with armies. It comes in quietly, through changed hearts, and over time it changes everything.

As with the mustard seed, some teachers read leaven here as a picture of evil, because leaven usually stands for sin elsewhere in the Bible. Jesus warned about "the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16:6), and Paul said, "a little leaven leavens the whole lump" (1 Corinthians 5:6). On that reading, the parable warns that false teaching would spread through the professing church. That is a serious view and it deserves respect. But a picture in the Bible can mean different things in different places. A lion pictures Satan in 1 Peter 5:8 and Jesus in Revelation 5:5. Here Jesus says plainly, "The kingdom of the heavens is like leaven" (Matthew 13:33). Read side by side with the mustard seed, I believe the point is the quiet, unstoppable spread of God's kingdom.

Small Beginnings

Put these four parables together and you get a picture of the kingdom that is very different from what the people of Jesus' day expected. They wanted the kingdom to come all at once, with a Messiah on a throne and the Romans driven out. One day it will come that way. But first it came like seed: small, hidden, growing in secret, mixed in for a time with weeds, and moving slowly through the world like leaven through dough.

The prophet Zechariah once asked, "For who has despised the day of small things?" (Zechariah 4:10). Don't despise small things. A tiny Bible study, a single child taught to pray, one conversation with a neighbor. God loves to start with something small.

Study Questions

1. In the parable of the seed that grows by itself, the farmer does not understand how the seed grows. How does that encourage you in praying for people who don't yet know Jesus?
2. Why does the master in the wheat and weeds refuse to let the servants pull up the weeds? What does that teach about God's patience?
3. Jesus said, "the field is the world." Why does that matter for how we read this parable?
4. The mustard seed and the leaven can be read as good news or as warnings. Read Matthew 13:31-33 again. Which reading seems more natural to you, and why?
5. Where in your life or church are you tempted to despise "the day of small things" (Zechariah 4:10)?

Chapter 8: Treasure, a Pearl, and a Net

> *Again, the kingdom of the heavens is like treasure hidden in the field, which a man, having found, hid; and from his joy he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field.*
>
> Matthew 13:44 (SLB)

After Jesus explained the wheat and the weeds to His disciples in the house, He kept going. Matthew records four more short parables, told to the disciples alone. The first two are about finding something worth everything. The third is about the end of the age. And the last is about what the disciples were to do with all they had learned.

24. The Hidden Treasure

Where to read it: Matthew 13:44
Who heard it: The disciples, in the house
What prompted it: Private teaching after the explanation of the wheat and the weeds

A man is working in a field that is not his own, maybe plowing for the owner or digging out a stone. His tool strikes something hard. He scrapes away the dirt and finds a jar, and inside it, a treasure. Coins, jewelry, silver. He covers it back up, goes home, and sells everything he owns, his house, his tools, his animals, to buy that field.

Behind the Story: Buried treasure (*Background*)
In a land that was invaded again and again, burying valuables in the ground was one of the safest ways to protect them. When an army came, a family might hide its coins and jewelry in a clay jar and bury it, hoping to dig it up later. If the owner was killed or carried off, the treasure stayed in the ground, sometimes for centuries. Archaeologists in Israel have found many such hoards of coins. People in Jesus' day knew that a farmer really could stumble onto one. Some readers ask whether the man in the parable was honest to buy the field without telling the owner. Jesus does not say, and it is not His point. A parable is not a lesson in property law. The point is the man's joy and what he was willing to give up.

Notice two words in the parable: "from his joy." The man does not sell everything with a long face, as if he were making a painful sacrifice. He sells everything because he has found something so much better that giving the rest up is easy. Anyone watching would think he had lost his mind. He knows he has made the best deal of his life.

What it means: The kingdom of God is worth more than everything else we have. When a person truly sees what Jesus is worth, giving things up for Him stops being a burden and becomes a joy. Paul knew exactly what this man felt. He had given up his reputation, his career, and his standing among his people. And he wrote, "I also consider all things to be loss because of the surpassing ***worth*** of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8).

This man was not looking for treasure. He found it while he was going about his ordinary work. Some people come to Christ that way, almost by surprise.

25. The Pearl of Great Price

Where to read it: Matthew 13:45-46
Who heard it: The disciples, in the house
What prompted it: Same private teaching

The next man is different. He is a merchant, a dealer in fine pearls, and he spends his life looking for the best. He travels, he bargains, he knows quality when he sees it. And one day he finds a pearl so fine that he sells everything he has to buy it.

> *Again, the kingdom of the heavens is like a man, a merchant, seeking fine pearls, who, having found one very precious pearl, having gone away, has sold all that he had and bought it.*
> (Matthew 13:45-46)

Behind the Story: Pearls in the Roman world (*Text confirmed*)

It is hard for us to understand how valuable pearls were in Jesus' day. Pliny the Elder wrote, "The first place therefore and the topmost rank among all things of price is held by pearls" (Natural History 9.54, Rackham translation). Most of them, he said, came from the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, so a pearl in Galilee had traveled a long way.

Pliny tells of seeing Lollia Paulina, the wife of the emperor Gaius (Caligula), at a dinner "covered with emeralds and pearls," worth in all "40,000,000 sesterces." He also tells the famous story of Cleopatra betting Mark Antony that she could spend "10,000,000 sesterces on a single banquet," and dissolving a great pearl in vinegar to do it (Natural History 9.58). Whether the Cleopatra story happened the way Pliny tells it is another question, but it shows what people of that time believed a single pearl could be worth.

What it means: The merchant was a seeker. He was already looking for something valuable when he found the one thing worth everything. Some people come to Christ that way. They have searched through philosophy, religion, success, and pleasure, and when they finally meet Jesus, they know they have found what they were looking for all along.

The two parables together make the same point from two angles. Whether you stumble onto the treasure or search your whole life for the pearl, the response is the same. You give up everything to have it. And you do it gladly.

Some Bible teachers read these two parables the other way around, with Jesus as the man and the merchant. On that view, Jesus is the one who gave up everything, His glory and His life, to buy the field, which is the world, and the pearl, which is the church. It is true that Jesus gave Himself for us, and that we are precious to Him. But in the flow of Matthew 13, the parables are about how people respond to the kingdom, and Jesus told them to disciples He was calling to leave everything and follow Him. I believe the more natural reading is that the kingdom is the treasure, and we are the ones who find it.

26. The Dragnet

Where to read it: Matthew 13:47-50
Who heard it: The disciples, in the house
What prompted it: Same private teaching

Several of the disciples were fishermen, and this picture came straight from their work. A dragnet was a long net, weighted on the bottom and with floats on the top. It was let out from a boat in a wide circle and then hauled in by men on the shore, scooping up everything in its path.

> *Again, the kingdom of the heavens is like a dragnet cast into the sea and having gathered together **fish** of every kind, which, when it was filled, having drawn **it** up on the shore and having sat down, they collected the good into vessels, but threw the bad out. So it will be at the consummation of the age: the angels will go out and separate the evil from **the** midst of the righteous, and they will throw them into the furnace of the fire; there will be the weeping and the gnashing of the teeth.* (Matthew 13:47-50)

Behind the Story: Clean and unclean fish (*Background*)
The Law of Moses allowed Israel to eat only fish that had both fins and scales (Leviticus 11:9-12). The Sea of Galilee holds several kinds of fish, and at least one common kind, a catfish, has no scales. So when the fishermen sorted their catch, they would throw out the fish they could not sell or eat, along with anything dead or worthless. The disciples had done this work many times.

What it means: This parable makes the same point as the wheat and the weeds, but with an even sharper edge. For now, the net of the gospel gathers in all kinds of people. The church will always have some in it who are not truly saved. But a day of sorting is coming, and it belongs to God's angels, not to us. Jesus said it plainly, and He spoke of "the furnace of the fire" and "the weeping and the gnashing of the teeth" (Matthew 13:50). Jesus spoke about hell more than anyone else in the Bible. He did it because He loved people too much to let them be surprised by it.

27. The Householder's Treasure, New and Old

Where to read it: Matthew 13:51-52
Who heard it: The disciples, in the house
What prompted it: Jesus asked the disciples if they had understood all these parables

When He finished, Jesus asked the disciples a question. "Have you understood all these things?" They said, "Yes, Lord" (Matthew 13:51). Then He told them one last short parable, about their own future.

> *And He said to them, "Because of this, every scribe having been discipled into the kingdom of the heavens is like a man, a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure **things** new and old."* (Matthew 13:52)

A scribe was a trained teacher of the Law. But Jesus is talking about a new kind of scribe, one who has been "discipled into the kingdom of the heavens." He is like the head of a house who goes into his storeroom and brings out treasures, some old and some new, to share with his family and guests.

What it means: The disciples now had both kinds of treasure. They had the old: the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. And they had the new: what Jesus had taught them about the kingdom. A good teacher of God's word does not throw away the old to make room for the new, and does not cling to the old and refuse anything new. He shows how the old points to Jesus and how Jesus fulfills the old. That is what this book has tried to do with the Old Testament parables in Chapter 1. And that is exactly what Jesus Himself did on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection, "having begun from Moses and from all the prophets" (Luke 24:27).

The Seven Parables of Matthew 13

Step back and look at all seven parables Matthew gathers in this chapter, and a pattern appears.

Parable	Where told	What it shows about the kingdom
The sower	To the crowd	It comes through the word, and hearts receive it differently
The wheat and the weeds	To the crowd	Good and evil grow together until the harvest
The mustard seed	To the crowd	It starts small and grows great
The leaven	To the crowd	It works quietly until it changes everything
The hidden treasure	To the disciples	It is worth everything, and finding it brings joy
The pearl	To the disciples	It is worth everything to the one who seeks
The dragnet	To the disciples	A final separation is coming

The four told to the crowd describe how the kingdom grows in the world. The ones told to the disciples call for a response from those who are already listening closely. And then the householder parable sends them out to teach. Hear, treasure, and pass it on.

Study Questions

1. The man in the field found the treasure by accident; the merchant was searching. Which one is closer to your own story of coming to Christ?
2. What does "from his joy" (Matthew 13:44) tell us about how Jesus wants us to think about what we give up for Him?
3. Read Philippians 3:7-8. How does Paul's testimony fit these two parables?
4. Why do you think Jesus told the dragnet parable right after the treasure and the pearl?
5. What are some old treasures and some new treasures that a Christian teacher brings out (Matthew 13:52)? How do they fit together?

Chapter 9: What Comes From the Heart

> *So also My heavenly Father will do to you, unless you forgive, each his brother, from your hearts their trespasses.*
>
> Matthew 18:35 (SLB)

Toward the end of His time in Galilee, Jesus' teaching turned more and more to the inner life. The Pharisees were very concerned with what a person touched, what he ate, and whether he had washed his hands the right way. Jesus kept turning the question around. What is in your heart? Who have you refused to forgive? Do you know whose child you are?

This chapter gathers four parables from those months. Two are short sayings that the Gospels treat as parables. One is a quick picture Jesus used with a woman who would not take no for an answer. And the last is one of the most searching stories Jesus ever told.

28. What Defiles a Person

Where to read it: Matthew 15:1-20; Mark 7:1-23
Who heard it: The crowd, then the disciples in a house
What prompted it: Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem complained that Jesus' disciples ate without washing their hands in the ceremonial way

A group of Pharisees and scribes came all the way from Jerusalem to Galilee to check on Jesus. What they found offended them. His disciples were eating bread without first washing their hands in the special way the tradition of the elders required. This was not about germs. It was a religious washing, a rule that had grown up around the Law but was not in it.

Jesus answered them sharply. He said they had set aside God's commandment to keep their own traditions, and He gave an example: they had found a way to let people avoid supporting their aging parents by declaring their money a gift to God (Mark 7:9-13). Then He called the crowd and spoke a short saying.

> *And having called to **Him** all the crowd, He was saying to them, "Hear Me, all **of you**, and understand: There is nothing outside the man entering into him that is able to defile him; but the **things** going out from him, those are the **things** defiling the man."* (Mark 7:14-15)

Later, in the house, His disciples asked Him "concerning the parable" (Mark 7:17). So Mark tells us this saying is a parable. And it was a riddle to them, because it went against everything they had been taught about clean and unclean.

> *And He was saying, "That which goes out of the man, that defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, go out the evil thoughts, adulteries, sexual immoralities, murders, thefts, covetings, wickednesses, deceit, sensuality, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil **things** go out from within and defile the man."* (Mark 7:20-23)

In the middle of the explanation come the words “cleansing all the foods” (Mark 7:19). Many translations print them as Mark’s own note to his readers, and the SLB keeps them inside Jesus’ sentence. Either way, looking back after the resurrection, the church understood that Jesus had set aside the food laws of the Old Testament. Peter would learn that lesson in a vision on a rooftop in Joppa (Acts 10:9-16).

What it means: Our biggest problem is not out there. It is in here. We like to think we would be good people if it were not for bad influences, bad company, or bad circumstances. Jesus says the evil comes from our own hearts. That is bad news, because it means we cannot fix ourselves by changing our surroundings. But it points us to the good news. God promised through Ezekiel, “I will give you a new heart” (Ezekiel 36:26). Only God can clean a person from the inside.

29. The Children’s Bread

Where to read it: Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30
Who heard it: A Gentile woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon, with the disciples present
What prompted it: She begged Jesus to cast a demon out of her daughter

Right after this teaching about clean and unclean, Jesus went north out of Israel into the region of Tyre and Sidon, Gentile country. A woman there, a Greek of Syrophoenician birth (Mark 7:26), heard He had come. She came and fell at His feet and begged Him to cast a demon out of her little daughter.

Jesus answered her with a short parable that sounds harsh to our ears.

> *But Jesus said to her, “Let the children first be satisfied; for it is not good to take the bread of the children and to cast **it** to the little dogs.”* (Mark 7:27)

The children are Israel. The bread is Jesus’ ministry, which in God’s plan went first to the Jews (Matthew 15:24; Romans 1:16). The word for dogs here is a small word, “little dogs,” the kind of house pets that lived inside and sat under the table during meals.

She did not argue with Him. She took His own picture and turned it into a plea.

> *But she answered and says to Him, “Yes, Lord; for even the little dogs under the table eat from the crumbs of the little children.” And He said to her, “Because of this word, go; the demon has gone out of your daughter.”* (Mark 7:28-29)

In Matthew’s account, Jesus said to her, “O woman, great ***is*** your faith! Let it be to you as you desire” (Matthew 15:28). Her daughter was healed that very hour.

What it means: Jesus was not insulting her. He was testing and drawing out her faith, the way a teacher asks a question he knows the student can answer. And she answered with humility and boldness at the same time. She did not claim to deserve anything. She just knew that even the crumbs from Jesus’ table were enough. Notice where this story falls. Right after Jesus taught that food cannot make a person unclean, He met a “dog,” a Gentile, whom the Pharisees would have called unclean. And she went home with her prayer answered. The bread was always meant to reach the nations.

30. The King's Sons Go Free

Where to read it: Matthew 17:24-27
Who heard it: Peter, in the house at Capernaum
What prompted it: Collectors of the temple tax asked Peter whether his Teacher paid it

When Jesus and the disciples came back to Capernaum, the men who collected the temple tax stopped Peter. "Does your Teacher not pay the didrachmas?" Peter said yes (Matthew 17:24-25).

Behind the Story: The temple tax (*Background*)
The Law of Moses required every Israelite man counted in the census to give half a shekel as an offering for the service of the tabernacle (Exodus 30:11-16). By Jesus' day this had become a yearly tax for the upkeep of the temple in Jerusalem, paid by Jewish men everywhere. The two-drachma coin, the "didrachma," was worth about half a shekel. The stater, the coin Peter found in the fish's mouth, was worth four drachmas, exactly enough to pay for two men.

Before Peter could even raise the subject, Jesus asked him a question in the form of a little parable. From whom do the kings of the earth collect their taxes, from their own sons, or from others? "From the strangers," Peter said. "Then the sons are free," Jesus answered (Matthew 17:25-26).

What it means: The temple tax was paid to God. And Jesus is God's Son. A king does not tax his own children. So Jesus had no duty to pay a tax for the upkeep of His own Father's house. It is a quiet, stunning claim. But then Jesus paid it anyway, "so that we may not cause them to stumble" (Matthew 17:27), and He paid for Peter too. There is a lesson for us in both halves. Jesus knew exactly who He was. And He was willing to give up His rights so as not to put an obstacle in someone else's way. Paul would later teach the church to do the same (1 Corinthians 9:19).

31. The Unforgiving Servant

Where to read it: Matthew 18:21-35
Who heard it: Peter and the disciples
What prompted it: Peter asked how many times he had to forgive a brother who sinned against him

Matthew 18 is a chapter about life together in God's family. Jesus had been teaching the disciples about humility, about caring for little ones, about going after a straying sheep (Matthew 18:12-14), and about how to deal with a brother who sins against you. Then Peter asked the question that was on everyone's mind.

"Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21).

Peter probably thought he was being generous. Seven was more than most people would offer. Jesus' answer must have taken his breath away. "I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22). Then He told him a story.

A king decided to settle accounts with his servants. One of them was brought in who owed him ten thousand talents. He could not pay, so the king ordered that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay what he could. The servant fell on his face and begged, "Master, have patience with me,

and I will pay you all" (Matthew 18:26). And the king, moved with compassion, did something no one expected. He forgave the whole debt.

Behind the Story: Ten thousand talents (*Text confirmed*)

The talent was not a coin but a weight of silver or gold, and the SLB gives the weight of ten thousand talents in a note as about 750,000 pounds. Bible dictionaries usually figure a talent of silver at about 6,000 denarii, or some 6,000 days' wages for a working man.

Josephus gives us a way to see what that meant. When Augustus divided Herod the Great's kingdom, he gave Galilee and Perea to Herod Antipas, the ruler over Jesus' home region. Josephus says that "Peres and Galilee paid their tribute, which amounted annually to two hundred talents," and that Archelaus's whole share, Judea, Samaria, and Idumea, brought in "six hundred talents" a year (Antiquities 17.11.4). So the servant owed fifty years of the entire tax income of Galilee and Perea. Ten thousand was the largest number in ordinary Greek counting, and the talent was the largest unit of money. Jesus' first hearers would have heard it the way we would hear a zillion dollars today. It was a debt no one could ever repay.

That servant walked out of the king's palace a free man. And on his way out, he ran into a fellow servant who owed him a hundred denarii, about a hundred days' wages. That is real money, but it is nothing next to what he had just been forgiven. He grabbed the man by the throat and said, "Pay me what you owe" (Matthew 18:28).

The fellow servant fell down and begged him in almost the same words the first servant had used: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you all" (Matthew 18:29). He would not listen. He had the man thrown into debtors' prison.

The other servants were sick about it, and they told the king. The king called him back.

> *Then his master, having called him to **him**, says to him, 'Evil slave, I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Was it not necessary for you also to have mercy on your fellow slave, as I also had mercy on you?' And his master, having been angered, delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was owed to him.* (Matthew 18:32-34)

Then Jesus turned the story on His hearers.

> *So also My heavenly Father will do to you, unless you forgive, each his brother, from your hearts their trespasses.* (Matthew 18:35)

What it means: Every person who has been forgiven by God has been forgiven a debt he could never pay. That is what our sin against God is. Every wrong anyone has ever done to us, however real and however painful, is a hundred denarii next to the ten thousand talents we owed. When we refuse to forgive, we act as though we have forgotten what we were forgiven.

This parable raises a hard question. Can a person lose God's forgiveness by refusing to forgive? The rest of the New Testament makes clear that we are saved by grace through faith, not by our own works (Ephesians 2:8-9). So the parable is not teaching that forgiveness is earned by forgiving. It is teaching that a heart that has truly received God's mercy will show mercy. A person who stubbornly refuses to forgive,

year after year, ought to ask himself whether he has ever truly understood the grace of God at all. That is why Jesus taught us to pray, “And forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).

Notice also the words “from your hearts.” Forgiveness is not pretending the wrong did not happen, and it does not always mean trust is restored overnight. It does mean letting go of the debt, giving up the right to make the other person pay, and leaving judgment to God (Romans 12:19). That can take time, and it often takes prayer. But it starts with remembering the ten thousand talents.

Study Questions

1. Read Mark 7:20-23. Which of the things on Jesus’ list do you see in your own heart? Why is it good news that the problem is inside us?
2. What do you learn from the way the Syrophoenician woman answered Jesus? How can you pray with the same kind of faith?
3. In the parable of the temple tax, Jesus gave up a right so as not to cause others to stumble. Is there a right you need to give up for someone else’s sake?
4. Compare ten thousand talents to a hundred denarii. Why did Jesus make the difference so huge?
5. Is there someone you need to forgive “from your heart”? What is one step you could take this week?

Part Three: On the Road to Jerusalem

Chapter 10: The Good Samaritan

> *And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go, and you do likewise."*
>
> Luke 10:37 (SLB)

Luke 9:51 marks a turning point in Jesus' life. "When the days of His being taken up were being fulfilled," Luke says, "He Himself set His face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem." From here to Luke 19, Jesus is on the road. He is heading toward the cross, and He knows it. And in these ten chapters, Luke gathers many of the best loved parables in the Bible. Most of them are found only in Luke.

The first is the most famous story Jesus ever told. Even people who have never opened a Bible know what a "good Samaritan" is. But most of them have no idea how shocking the story was when Jesus first told it.

For five straight years I helped lead youth mission trips to Baja, Mexico. Service on a trip like that is not a box to check. You are there to meet the needs in front of you. Jesus turned the question from "Who is my neighbor?" to "Will I act like one?" Loving others starts when we stop making excuses and cross the road.

32. The Good Samaritan

Where to read it: Luke 10:25-37
Who heard it: A lawyer, an expert in the Law of Moses, with the disciples and others nearby
What prompted it: The lawyer asked how to inherit eternal life, and then, wanting to justify himself, asked, "And who is my neighbor?"

Two Questions

The story begins with a test. A lawyer, which in the Gospels means an expert in the Law of Moses, stood up and asked Jesus, "Teacher, having done what will I inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25).

Jesus answered his question with a question. What does the Law say? How do you read it? The lawyer gave a fine answer. He quoted Deuteronomy 6:5, to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and Leviticus 19:18, to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus Himself would give the same two commandments as the greatest in the Law (Mark 12:28-31).

"You have answered correctly," Jesus said. "Do this, and you will live" (Luke 10:28).

That should have ended the conversation. But it left the lawyer in an uncomfortable spot. If eternal life means loving God with everything you have and loving your neighbor as yourself, then no one has ever done it. The lawyer knew he had not. So Luke tells us, "he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" (Luke 10:29).

That was the real question. He was looking for a limit. If he could draw the circle of "neighbor" small enough, maybe he could keep the commandment after all. Many teachers of that day did draw it small. A

neighbor was a fellow Jew, and maybe a convert to Judaism. Certainly not a Gentile, and certainly not a Samaritan.

Jesus did not answer with a definition. He told a story.

The Road Down to Jericho

> *And having taken **it** up, Jesus said, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who, having both stripped him and inflicted wounds, went away, having left **him** half dead as he was."* (Luke 10:30)

Everyone in Jesus' audience knew that road, and they knew it was dangerous.

Behind the Story: The road from Jerusalem to Jericho (*Text confirmed*)

Josephus describes Jericho and its famous spring in *The Jewish War*, and he gives the distance and the kind of country the road passes through: "This place is one hundred and fifty furlongs from Jerusalem, and sixty from Jordan. The country, as far as Jerusalem, is desert and stony" (The Jewish War 4.8.3, Whiston translation). One hundred and fifty Greek furlongs is about seventeen miles.

In that seventeen miles the road drops from Jerusalem, about 2,500 feet above sea level, to Jericho, more than 800 feet below it, a fall of well over three thousand feet through dry, rocky hills. That is why Jesus says the man was "going down." The road wound through narrow places with caves and ravines, good hiding places for robbers. Josephus also tells how, a few years after Jesus, "all Judea was overrun with robberies" (Antiquities 20.6.1).

The robbers stripped the man, beat him, and left him half dead. Stripped of his clothes, he had nothing to show who he was. Was he a Jew or a Gentile? Rich or poor? Unconscious, he could not even speak, so no one could tell his accent. He was simply a human being in need.

The Priest and the Levite

> *And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and having seen him, he passed by on the opposite side. And likewise a Levite also, having been at the place, having come and seen **him**, passed by on the opposite side.* (Luke 10:31-32)

Jericho was one of the towns where many priests and Levites lived when they were not serving their turn at the temple. So it would be natural to meet them on this road. And Jesus' listeners might have expected a priest to be the hero. Here was a man of God, coming down from serving God in His temple. Surely he would help.

He did not. He saw the man and crossed to the other side of the road. So did the Levite, a temple assistant from the tribe of Levi.

Why? Jesus does not say, and people have guessed for centuries. Some suggest they were afraid the man was dead, and touching a corpse would have made them ceremonially unclean (Numbers 19:11). Others suggest they were afraid the robbers were still nearby, or that the man was bait for a trap. Others think they were just in a hurry. Jesus leaves the reason out, and I think that is on purpose. There is always a reason not to help. Whatever their reasons were, they were not good enough.

Audiences in Jesus' day were used to stories with three characters, and they would have expected the third man to be the hero. After a priest and a Levite, the natural third would be an ordinary Israelite, a layman. That would have been a fine story with a gentle jab at the religious leaders. But Jesus did not say an Israelite came along.

But a Samaritan

> *But a certain Samaritan, journeying, came to him, and having seen him, he felt compassion, and having approached, he bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and having put him on his own animal, he brought him to an inn and took care of him. And on the next day, having gone out, having taken out two denarii, he gave* ***them*** *to the innkeeper and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I, when I return, will repay you.'* (Luke 10:33-35)

It is hard to get across to a modern reader how that one word, "Samaritan," must have landed.

Behind the Story: Jews and Samaritans (*Text confirmed*)

The Samaritans lived in the hill country between Judea and Galilee. They were descended in part from Israelites of the old northern kingdom and in part from peoples the Assyrians settled there after 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17:24-41). They accepted only the five books of Moses, and they worshiped on Mount Gerizim instead of in Jerusalem (John 4:20). John says simply, "Jews do not associate with Samaritans" (John 4:9).

Josephus shows how deep the hatred ran. In the years when Jesus was a boy, under the Roman governor Coponius, "some of the Samaritans came privately into Jerusalem, and threw about dead men's bodies, in the cloisters" of the temple during the Passover, defiling it, after which "the Jews afterward excluded them out of the temple" (Antiquities 18.2.2). About twenty years after the crucifixion, Samaritans at a village called Ginea "fought with the Galileans, and killed a great many of them" as they traveled through Samaria to a feast, and Jewish fighters answered by burning Samaritan villages (Antiquities 20.6.1). Only a few weeks before Jesus told this parable, a Samaritan village had refused to let Him stay the night, and James and John wanted to call fire down from heaven on it (Luke 9:51-56).

So when Jesus said, "But a certain Samaritan," His listeners would have tensed. The Samaritan was the enemy. And he is the one who stops.

Look at everything he does. He "felt compassion." He went to the man. He bound up his wounds, pouring on oil to soothe and wine to clean. He set the man on his own animal, which means he walked. He took him to an inn and cared for him through the night. The next day he paid the innkeeper two denarii, about two days' wages, enough for a good stretch of care, and he promised to cover anything more on his way back.

That last promise is easy to miss. An injured man who could not pay his bill at an inn in those days might be held as a debtor. The Samaritan made sure that would not happen. He gave a blank check for a stranger, and an enemy at that.

The Question Turned Around

Then Jesus asked His question.

> *Which therefore of these three seems to you to have become a neighbor to the one who fell among the robbers?" And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go, and you do likewise.* (Luke 10:36-37)

Notice what Jesus did. The lawyer had asked, "Who is my neighbor?" He wanted to know who he was required to love. Jesus asked which one became a neighbor. He turned the question from who deserves my love to what kind of person I am.

And notice the lawyer's answer. He could not even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan." He said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." But he got the point. And Jesus sent him off with a command: "Go, and you do likewise."

What It Means

Love has no boundary lines. The lawyer wanted a limit. Jesus gave him none. Our neighbor is anyone God puts in our path who needs help, whatever his race, religion, politics, or history with us. Jesus had already said, "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44). This story shows what that looks like on a dusty road.

Love sees, feels, and acts. All three men saw the wounded man. Only the Samaritan let what he saw move his heart, and only he let his heart move his hands and feet. Real love is not a feeling that stays inside. It costs time, money, comfort, and sometimes safety.

Religion is not the same as love. The priest and the Levite were serious about God. They knew the Scriptures. They had just come from the temple. And they walked by. It is possible to be very religious and very cold. James puts it this way: if a brother or sister is without clothes and food, and you say, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," but give them nothing they need, what good is it? (James 2:15-16).

No one can earn eternal life this way. Remember how the conversation started. The lawyer asked what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him to love God and his neighbor perfectly, and then He told a story that showed how far the love God requires really goes. If that is the standard, who can meet it? Not the lawyer. Not you. Not me. The parable leaves us needing a Savior.

And there is a Savior in the story. I warned in Chapter 3 against turning this parable into a detailed allegory. The innkeeper is not Paul, and the two denarii are not two sacraments. But it is fair to notice, once we have heard the main point, that Jesus Himself is the greatest Good Samaritan. He was despised and rejected by men (Isaiah 53:3). His enemies called Him a Samaritan (John 8:48). And when we lay dying by the road, stripped and beaten by our sin, He did not pass by. He came to where we were, paid the full price, and promised to come back. The love He commands is the love He first showed us.

Study Questions

1. Why did the lawyer ask, "And who is my neighbor?" What was he hoping Jesus would say?
2. Read the **Behind the Story** box on Jews and Samaritans. Who would be the "Samaritan" for you or for people in your community today?
3. The priest and Levite may have had reasons for passing by. What reasons do we give ourselves for not helping people in need?

4. Jesus changed the question from who is my neighbor to who became a neighbor. How does that change the way you think about loving others?

5. How does this parable show that we cannot earn eternal life by our own good works?

6. Who has God put on your road this week who needs mercy? What is one thing you will do?

Chapter 11: A Friend at Midnight and a Rich Fool

> *And He said to them, "Watch out and guard yourselves from covetousness, because even when anyone has abundance, his life is not from his possessions."*
>
> Luke 12:15 (SLB)

Two of the parables Luke records on the road to Jerusalem seem at first to have nothing to do with each other. One is about a man knocking on his neighbor's door at midnight, asking for bread. The other is about a rich farmer who builds bigger barns. But put them side by side and they make a pair. One is about a man who knows he has nothing and asks. The other is about a man who thinks he has everything and never asks for anything at all.

33. The Friend at Midnight

Where to read it: Luke 11:5-13
Who heard it: The disciples
What prompted it: One of the disciples had watched Jesus praying and asked, "Lord, teach us to pray"

The disciples had watched Jesus pray. They had seen Him slip away early in the morning and spend whole nights alone with His Father. One day, when He finished praying, one of them said, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John also taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). Jesus gave them a short form of what we call the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:2-4). Then He told them a story.

> *And He said to them, "Which of you will have a friend, and will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, since a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing that I will set before him'; and that one, answering from within, says, 'Do not cause me trouble; the door has already been shut, and my children are with me in the bed; I am not able, having risen, to give to you'?"* (Luke 11:5-7)

Behind the Story: Hospitality and a one-room house (*Background*)
In the villages of Israel, welcoming a traveler was a sacred duty, and the whole village shared in the honor or the shame of how a guest was treated. Travelers often walked in the cool of the evening to avoid the heat, so arriving at midnight was not strange. Bread was baked fresh each day, often early in the morning, so by night a family might have nothing left. A poor family's house was usually one room. At night the family slept together on mats on a raised part of the floor, sometimes with animals in the lower part. To get up, unbolt the heavy door, and find bread would mean waking the whole household. That is why the man inside says what he says.

The man inside will not get up just because the man outside is his friend. But Jesus says he will get up and give him "as many as he needs" for another reason.

> *I say to you, even if he will not give to him, having risen, because of his being his friend, yet because of his shamelessness, having risen, he will give him as many as he needs.* (Luke 11:8)

The word translated "shamelessness" is the Greek *anaideia*. It means a lack of shame, a boldness that does not care how it looks. Older translations often rendered it "importunity" or "persistence." Scholars

argue about whose shamelessness it is. Most readers take it to mean the man outside, who keeps knocking and will not go away. Some suggest it means the man inside, who will get up to avoid the shame of having refused a neighbor's guest. Either way, the point of the story does not change much. The bread comes, and it comes in full.

Then Jesus drew out the lesson in words most of us have known since childhood.

> *And I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.* (Luke 11:9-10)

And then He gave the picture we looked at in Chapter 4: no father would give his son a snake when he asks for a fish. "If you then, being evil, know ***how*** to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father who ***is*** from heaven give ***the*** Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (Luke 11:13).

What it means: This is another how-much-more parable. God is not a sleepy, grumpy neighbor who has to be pestered into helping. Jesus' point is the contrast. If even a reluctant neighbor will finally get up at midnight and give his friend what he needs, how much more will your Father in heaven, who loves you, hear you when you pray?

Notice too why the man was knocking. He was not asking for bread for himself. He was asking for a friend who had come to him with nothing. That is a beautiful picture of praying for others. We often have nothing to give the people God sends our way. We do not have the answers they need or the strength they need. But we know Someone who does, and we can go and knock on His door for them.

And notice the boldness. This man did not care how it looked. He kept knocking. Jesus wants us to pray like that: honestly, boldly, and without giving up. The verbs in Luke 11:9 in Greek suggest an ongoing action. Keep asking. Keep seeking. Keep knocking.

34. The Rich Fool

Where to read it: Luke 12:13-21
Who heard it: A man from the crowd, with the crowd and the disciples listening
What prompted it: A man asked Jesus to make his brother divide the family inheritance with him

Some time later, Jesus was teaching a huge crowd, thousands of people so packed together that they were stepping on each other (Luke 12:1). A man in the crowd called out a request.

> *Then someone from the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or divider over you?" And He said to them, "Watch out and guard yourselves from covetousness, because even when anyone has abundance, his life is not from his possessions."* (Luke 12:13-15)

It was a common thing in that day to ask a respected rabbi to settle a dispute about the Law, and inheritance was covered by the Law (Deuteronomy 21:17; Numbers 27:1-11). Maybe the man had a real grievance. Jesus did not say he was wrong to want his share. But He saw what was going on in the man's heart, and He refused to be pulled into the fight. Instead, He warned the whole crowd about something more dangerous than an unfair brother: covetousness, the hunger for more. Then He told a story.

> *Then He spoke a parable to them, saying, "The land of a certain rich man produced abundantly. And he was reasoning within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, because I do not have **a place** where I will store my fruits?' And he said, 'This I will do: I will tear down my barns and build greater **ones**, and I will store there all my produce and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; rest, eat, drink, be merry."'"* (Luke 12:16-19)

On the surface, this man does nothing wrong. He did not steal his wealth. His land produced abundantly. He was a good farmer, and God gave the increase. He faced a real problem: where to put it all. And his solution sounds like sound business. Tear down the small barns, build bigger ones, store up the harvest, and retire early.

But listen to how he talks. He has a conversation with no one but himself. "He was reasoning within himself." There is no mention of God, no mention of his family, no mention of his workers who helped bring in the crop, no mention of the poor. Count the words "I" and "my" in his little speech. My fruits, my barns, my produce, my goods, my soul. He is the only person in his world.

> *But God said to him, 'Fool! This night they are demanding your soul from you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So **is** the one who treasures up for himself and is not rich toward God.* (Luke 12:20-21)

God calls him a fool. In the Bible, a fool is not a person with low intelligence. The fool is the person who lives as though there is no God (Psalm 14:1). This man was smart about money and foolish about everything that mattered. He made a careful plan for "many years," and he did not have one more night.

The phrase "they are demanding your soul" uses a word that could be used for calling in a loan. His life was not his own. It had been lent to him, and that night the loan was called.

And then God's question: "The things you have prepared, whose will they be?" He would leave it all behind. Maybe to the very kind of quarreling brothers who started this conversation.

Rich Toward God

Jesus did not tell this parable to say that money is evil, or that saving for the future is wrong. Proverbs praises the ant that stores up food in summer (Proverbs 6:6-8). Paul tells parents to provide for their families (1 Timothy 5:8). The problem with the rich fool was not that he was rich. It was that he was rich only toward himself, and "not rich toward God."

What does it mean to be rich toward God? Jesus went on to explain it right away to His disciples. Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or wear, because "the life is more than the food" (Luke 12:23). Look at the ravens and the lilies; God feeds them and clothes them. Seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you. And then:

> *Sell your possessions and give alms; make for yourselves purses that do not grow old, an unfailing treasure in the heavens, where a thief does not come near nor a moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart also will be.* (Luke 12:33-34)

Paul gave the same counsel to Timothy for wealthy believers in his church. They were not to set their hope "on ***the*** uncertainty of riches, but in the living God," and to be "rich in good works, to be generous, ready to share" (1 Timothy 6:17-18).

What it means: Life does not consist in what we own. We all know that in our heads, but our hearts keep forgetting it. Every one of us will one day hear the same words the rich fool heard: "This night." The only question is what we will have laid up by then, and where. James warns those who make big plans without God that our life "is a vapor that appears for a little ***while*** and then vanishes" (James 4:14). Being rich toward God means trusting Him instead of our barns, using what He gives us to bless others, and laying up treasure where it cannot be lost.

Two Men, Two Doors

Think again about the two men in these parables. The friend at midnight had nothing in his house, and he knew it. So he went out in the dark and knocked until he got what he needed. The rich fool had everything in his barns, and he thought that settled it. He never knocked on anyone's door, least of all God's.

Most of us are somewhere between the two. On our good days we pray like the man at midnight. On our bad days we plan like the man with the barns. These two parables call us to remember that whatever we have, we are always the poor man at the door. Everything comes from our Father's hand, and He is glad to give.

Study Questions

1. Read Luke 11:5-13. Why do you think Jesus followed the Lord's Prayer with this story?
2. The man at midnight was asking for someone else. Who are the people God has brought to your door that you need to pray for?
3. What is the difference between persistence in prayer and trying to wear God down?
4. Count the words "I" and "my" in Luke 12:17-19. What does the rich fool's speech reveal about his heart?
5. Jesus said life does not consist in the abundance of possessions (Luke 12:15). How does our culture tell us the opposite?
6. What is one practical way you could be more "rich toward God" this month?

Chapter 12: Ready for the Master

> *You also therefore be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*
>
> Luke 12:40 (SLB)

Right after warning the crowd about the rich fool and telling His disciples not to worry, Jesus turned their eyes to the future. The rich fool was not ready for the night God called in his life. Now Jesus told His disciples three short parables about being ready for a different night: the night their Master comes back.

Jesus told parables like these more than once. Luke places them on the road to Jerusalem. Matthew and Mark record similar ones in the Olivet Discourse, the long teaching Jesus gave on the Mount of Olives a few days before the cross (Matthew 24:42-51; Mark 13:33-37). I have put them together here and will come back to the rest of the Olivet parables in Chapter 20.

35. The Watchful Servants and the Doorkeeper

Where to read it: Luke 12:35-38; Mark 13:33-37
Who heard it: The disciples, with the crowd nearby; in Mark, Peter, James, John, and Andrew on the Mount of Olives
What prompted it: Teaching after the rich fool on being ready; in Mark, the disciples asked when the temple would be destroyed and what the sign of the end would be

> *Let your waists be girded and the lamps burning; and you **be** like men who are waiting for their master, when he will return from the wedding feasts, so that when he has come and knocked, they may immediately open to him.* (Luke 12:35-36)

Picture a household late at night. The master has gone to a wedding feast, and in that day a wedding could last for days, so no one knows when he will come home. The servants could go to bed. Instead, they keep their long robes tucked up into their belts, ready to move. The lamps stay lit. And the moment they hear his knock, they throw the door open.

Then Jesus said something no one in that world would ever expect.

> *Blessed **are** those slaves whom the master, having come, will find watching. Truly I say to you that he will gird himself and have them recline **at table**, and having come up, he will serve them. And if he comes in the second watch, and comes in the third watch, and finds **them** so, blessed are those slaves.* (Luke 12:37-38)

Masters did not serve their servants. It was always the other way around. But this master, finding his servants awake and waiting for him, ties on an apron, seats them at his table, and brings them their dinner. Jesus is describing Himself. He is the Master who "did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45). On the night before the cross, He would tie a towel around His waist and wash His disciples' feet (John 13:4-5). And He promises that when He returns, He will honor His faithful servants in a way that will leave them amazed.

Behind the Story: The watches of the night (*Background*)

The Jews of the Old Testament divided the night into three watches (Judges 7:19; Lamentations 2:19). The Romans divided it into four, from about six in the evening to six in the morning: evening, midnight, the crowing of the rooster, and early morning. Mark uses the Roman names in Jesus' words: "in the evening, or at midnight, or at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning" (Mark 13:35). Luke's second watch and third watch would be the deep middle of the night, the hours when it is hardest to stay awake.

Mark's version adds a doorkeeper, a servant whose one job was to watch for the master's return and open the door. "Keep watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming" (Mark 13:35). And Mark ends with words meant for every reader: "And what I say to you, I say to all: keep watch!" (Mark 13:37).

What it means: Waiting for Jesus is not sitting around doing nothing. It is staying dressed for work with the lamp burning. It means living each day so that if He came tonight, we would be glad to open the door.

36. The Thief in the Night

Where to read it: Luke 12:39-40; Matthew 24:43-44
Who heard it: The disciples, with the crowd nearby; in Matthew, the disciples on the Mount of Olives
What prompted it: Same teaching on readiness

Then Jesus changed the picture. If a homeowner knew what hour a thief was coming, he would stay awake and not let his house be broken into.

> *You also therefore be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*
> (Luke 12:40)

Houses in Israel were often built of mud brick or rough stone, and the Greek word for "broken into" means to dig through. A thief could dig through a wall in the dark while the family slept.

It is startling that Jesus would compare His own coming to a thief's. But the comparison is about one thing only: no warning. Thieves do not send a note ahead. The apostles picked up the picture and used it often. "The day of ***the*** Lord comes in this way, as a thief in ***the*** night," Paul wrote, but he added that believers are not in darkness, "so that the day would overtake you like a thief" (1 Thessalonians 5:2, 4). Peter used it (2 Peter 3:10), and so did the risen Jesus in Revelation (Revelation 3:3; 16:15).

What it means: The time of Jesus' coming is unknown, and it will come when many least expect it. As a pre-tribulation believer, I believe the next event on God's calendar is the coming of Christ for His church, the Rapture, when He will catch up His people to meet Him in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). The Bible gives no signs that must happen first. It could happen any day. That is exactly the kind of readiness these parables call for. Other Bible-believing Christians understand the timing of the Rapture differently, but all of us agree on what Jesus says here: be ready, because you do not know the hour.

37. The Faithful and Unfaithful Manager

Where to read it: Luke 12:41-48; Matthew 24:45-51
Who heard it: Peter and the disciples; in Matthew, the disciples on the Mount of Olives
What prompted it: Peter asked, "Lord, are You speaking this parable to us, or also to all?"

Peter wanted to know who these parables were for. Were they just for the Twelve, or for everyone? Jesus answered with another question, and another story.

> *And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and wise manager whom the master will set over his household servants, to give **them** the measure of grain in season? Blessed **is** that slave whom his master, having come, will find doing so. In truth I say to you that he will set him over all his possessions."* (Luke 12:42-44)

A manager in a large household was a trusted slave put in charge of the other servants. His job was to hand out the food rations at the right times. If the master came home and found him doing his job, the reward would be a promotion over everything the master owned.

But then Jesus describes a different kind of manager. This one says to himself, "My master delays to come." So he starts beating the other servants, eating and drinking, and getting drunk. He thinks he has plenty of time to clean up before the master gets back. He is wrong.

> *the master of that slave will come on a day that he does not expect and at an hour that he does not know, and will cut him in two and will assign his portion with the unfaithful.* (Luke 12:46)

The punishment is terrible. "Cut him in two" is a picture of the most severe judgment. Matthew's version says his portion is with "the hypocrites; there will be the weeping and the gnashing of the teeth" (Matthew 24:51). This is the language Jesus uses for final judgment. The unfaithful manager was never truly a faithful servant. He only wore the uniform.

Jesus ends with a principle that reaches far beyond this story.

> *And that slave who knew the will of his master and did not prepare nor do according to his will, will be beaten **with** many **blows**; but the one who did not know, and did things worthy of blows, will be beaten **with** few. And everyone to whom much was given, much will be required from him; and to whom they entrusted much, they will ask of him all the more.* (Luke 12:47-48)

What it means: Jesus answered Peter's question. Yes, these parables are for you, the leaders, in a special way. Anyone who has been given responsibility in God's household, whether a pastor, a teacher, a parent, or a small group leader, has been put in charge of feeding others. The test of faithfulness is simple: what is the Master finding you doing? Are you feeding His people, or using your position for yourself?

The danger in this parable is the thought, "My master delays to come." It is the lie that there is plenty of time. Most people who drift away from God do not decide to rebel. They just decide that what they do today does not matter much. Jesus says it matters.

And His last words are a warning to everyone who has had much: much Bible teaching, many years in church, great opportunities, great gifts. "Everyone to whom much was given, much will be required from him." Those who knew more will be held to a higher standard. Notice also that Jesus speaks of degrees of

punishment, many blows and few. God's judgment is perfectly fair. He takes into account what each person knew.

Living in the Meantime

These three parables were told to people who were about to enter a long time of waiting. Jesus would soon go to the cross, rise, and return to the Father, and His people would spend a long time waiting for Him to come back. Nearly two thousand years now. That waiting can make people sleepy, or careless, or cynical. Peter warned that in the last days, scoffers would come saying, "Where is the promise of His coming?" (2 Peter 3:3-4).

Jesus' answer is not to set dates or guess. It is to stay dressed, keep the lamp burning, and keep doing the work He gave us. The servant who is faithful today will be ready whenever He comes.

Study Questions

1. In Luke 12:37 the master serves his servants. What does that tell you about the kind of Master Jesus is?
2. What does it look like in daily life to "let your waists be girded and the lamps burning"?
3. Why do you think Jesus compared His coming to a thief? What is the one point of comparison?
4. The unfaithful manager said, "My master delays to come." In what ways do people today think the same thing?
5. Read Luke 12:48. What has God given you "much" of? What might He require of you because of it?

Chapter 13: A Fig Tree and a Narrow Door

> *Strive to enter through the narrow gate; for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able.*
>
> Luke 13:24 (SLB)

Luke 13 is a sobering chapter. It opens with news of a massacre and a building collapse, and it closes with Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. In between come two parables with the same message: there is still time, but not forever. God is patient, but His patience has a purpose, and the door will not stay open always.

Two Tragedies

Some people came to Jesus with fresh news. Pilate, the Roman governor, had killed some Galileans while they were offering sacrifices, so that their own blood was mixed with the blood of their animals (Luke 13:1). It was a horrible thing, and the people telling it may have been hoping for a reaction. Maybe they wanted Jesus to condemn Rome. Maybe they wanted Him to say those Galileans must have been especially wicked to die that way.

Behind the Story: Pilate and the Galileans (*Text confirmed*)

No writer outside the Bible mentions this particular killing. But Josephus describes others like it that show what kind of governor Pilate was. When Pilate used money from the temple treasury to build an aqueduct for Jerusalem, a great crowd gathered to protest. He dressed his soldiers in ordinary clothes, hid daggers under their garments, and had them surround the crowd. At his signal they attacked, and "equally punished those that were tumultuous, and those that were not," so that "there were a great number of them slain" (Antiquities 18.3.2, Whiston translation). An event like the one in Luke 13:1 fits what Josephus tells us about Pilate.

The tower in Siloam, which Jesus mentions next, is not named outside the Bible either. Siloam was the area at the south end of Jerusalem around the Pool of Siloam, and towers stood along the city walls there. A collapse that killed eighteen people would have been the talk of the city.

Jesus did not take either bait. Instead, He turned the conversation around on the people telling the story.

> *And answering, Jesus said to them, "Do you think that these Galileans were sinners beyond all the Galileans, because they have suffered such things? No, I say to you; but unless you repent, you will all perish likewise. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that these were debtors beyond all the men who dwell in Jerusalem? No, I say to you; but unless you repent, you will all perish likewise."* (Luke 13:2-5)

Many people then believed that great suffering was always a sign of great sin. Job's friends believed it. Jesus' own disciples believed it (John 9:2). Jesus said no. Those who died were not worse sinners than anyone else. But that is not comforting news, because it means everyone else is in the same danger. "Unless you repent, you will all perish likewise." Then He told a parable.

38. The Barren Fig Tree

Where to read it: Luke 13:6-9
Who heard it: People in the crowd who had brought news of the Galileans killed by Pilate
What prompted it: Jesus had just told them that unless they repented, they would all perish

> *Then He was speaking this parable: "A certain **man** had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and did not find **any**. Then he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, **for** three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree and do not find **any**. Cut it down; why does it even use up the ground?' And answering, he says to him, 'Sir, leave it this year also, until I dig around it and put in manure; and if indeed it bears fruit—but if not, in the future you will cut it down.'"* (Luke 13:6-9)

Behind the Story: Fig trees in a vineyard (*Background*)

Fig trees were often planted in vineyards in Israel, where the soil was good and the land was tended. A fig tree took some years to mature, and under the Law of Moses the fruit of a newly planted tree was not to be eaten for its first three years (Leviticus 19:23). The owner in the story has been looking for fruit for three years beyond that, so this tree has had every chance. A fig tree also drinks a lot of water and spreads wide roots, taking nutrients from the vines around it. That is why the owner asks, "why does it even use up the ground?" (Luke 13:7). It is not just useless. It is taking what could feed something else.

In the Old Testament, the fig tree and the vine are often pictures of Israel (Hosea 9:10; Micah 7:1; Jeremiah 8:13). Jesus' listeners would have caught that. For three years Jesus Himself had been coming to His people, preaching, healing, and looking for the fruit of repentance. And for the most part He had not found it.

But look at the vinedresser. He pleads for the tree. Give it one more year. Let me dig around it, loosen the soil, and put manure on it. Let me do everything I can. Then if it bears fruit, good. And if not, cut it down.

Did you notice how the story ends? It doesn't. In the SLB the vinedresser's sentence breaks off in the middle. He says, "and if indeed it bears fruit," and then stops, and starts again: "but if not, in the future you will cut it down." We never find out what happened to the tree. Jesus leaves it hanging, because His listeners were the tree, and the ending was up to them.

What it means: God is patient. The owner had every right to cut the tree down after three years, and he gave it another year with extra care. Peter wrote that "the Lord is not slow concerning the promise, as some consider slowness, but is patient toward us, not wishing any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Every day you have not yet been cut down is a day of mercy.

But God's patience has a limit. "If not, in the future you will cut it down." For Jerusalem, that came in A.D. 70, when the Romans destroyed the city and the temple, about forty years after Jesus told this story. For each of us, it comes at the end of our life, or when Christ returns, whichever is first. The extra year is not a reason to relax. It is a reason to repent now.

A Bent Woman Set Free

Right after this parable, Luke tells of a Sabbath day when Jesus healed a woman who had been bent over for eighteen years and could not stand up straight (Luke 13:10-17). The synagogue leader was angry that He healed on the Sabbath. Jesus shamed him for caring more about his animals than about a daughter of Abraham. And then, in that same synagogue, He told again the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven (Luke 13:18-21), which we looked at in Chapter 7. Even in a chapter full of warnings, the kingdom is still growing, quietly and surely. A barren tree may be cut down, but God's purposes will bear fruit.

39. The Narrow Door and the Shut Door

Where to read it: Luke 13:22-30; Matthew 7:13-14
Who heard it: A questioner on the road, with the crowd; in Matthew, the disciples and crowds at the Sermon on the Mount
What prompted it: Someone asked, "Lord, are those who are being saved few?"

As Jesus was making His way toward Jerusalem, teaching in the towns and villages, someone asked Him a question. "Lord, are those who are being saved few?" (Luke 13:23).

It is the kind of question people still like to ask. How many will be saved? Will most people make it? What about people who never heard? Jesus never answered that kind of question the way the questioner wanted. He always turned it into a personal one. Instead of telling the man how many would be saved, He told him to make sure he was one of them.

> *Strive to enter through the narrow gate; for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. From whenever the master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us,' and answering, he will say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from,' then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' And he will say, 'I say to you, I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from me, all* ***you*** *workers of unrighteousness.'*
> (Luke 13:24-27)

In Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus used the same picture in a slightly different way. There are two gates and two roads. One gate is wide and the road is broad, and many go through it, and it leads to destruction. The other gate is narrow and the road is hard, and few find it, and it leads to life (Matthew 7:13-14).

In Luke the picture moves. At first the door is narrow but open. Then the master of the house gets up and shuts it. And people who thought they belonged are left outside, knocking. They protest that they knew him. "We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets." They had been near Jesus. They had heard Him teach. They might have even shared a meal with Him. But He says, "I do not know you, where you are from."

> *There will be the weeping and the gnashing of the teeth there, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being cast outside. And they will come from east and west, and from north and south, and will recline in the kingdom of God. And look, there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last.*
> (Luke 13:28-30)

What it means: The word "strive" in Luke 13:24 is the Greek word our English "agonize" comes from. It is the word for an athlete straining to win. Jesus does not mean we earn salvation by effort. Salvation is a gift. But receiving it is not something to put off or treat lightly. Repent and believe now, while the door is open.

Being near Jesus is not the same as knowing Him. These people had been around Him. They had heard Him in their streets. That is a warning for anyone who grew up in church, who knows the songs and the stories, but has never personally turned from sin and trusted Christ.

And there are surprises at the end. People from east and west, north and south, which means the Gentile nations, will sit down at the table in the kingdom with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, while some who expected a seat are outside. "There are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last." God's kingdom is open to anyone who comes through the narrow door, and the narrow door is Jesus Himself. "I am the door," He said. "If anyone enters through Me, he will be saved" (John 10:9).

Jerusalem, Jerusalem

Luke 13 ends with Jesus being warned that Herod Antipas wanted to kill Him. He sent back word to "this fox" that He would finish His work, and that a prophet could not die outside Jerusalem (Luke 13:31-33). Then His heart broke over the city.

> *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the **one** killing the prophets and stoning those sent to her! How often I was willing to gather your children together, the way a hen **gathers** her own brood under **her** wings, and you were not willing!* (Luke 13:34)

That is the heart behind these hard parables. Jesus did not warn people because He wanted them to be cut down or shut out. He warned them because He wanted to gather them in. The vinedresser pleading for one more year is Jesus Himself.

Study Questions

1. Why did Jesus refuse to say the Galileans who died were worse sinners than others? What did He say instead?
2. In the parable of the barren fig tree, who do you think the vinedresser represents? What does his plea tell you about God's heart?
3. The parable has no ending. Why do you think Jesus left it that way?
4. Someone asked Jesus, "Are those who are being saved few?" Why do you think Jesus answered the way He did?
5. The people outside the door said, "We ate and drank in your presence." What is the difference between being near Jesus and knowing Him?
6. Is there anything you have been putting off with God because you thought there would be more time?

Chapter 14: Parables at the Dinner Table

> *Then one of those reclining with **Him**, having heard these things, said to Him, "Blessed **is he** who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"*
>
> Luke 14:15 (SLB)

Jesus loved a good meal, and He used dinners to teach. Some of His most pointed parables were told while He was reclining at someone's table. Luke 14 takes place at one of those dinners, at the house of a leading Pharisee on a Sabbath day. The guests had their eyes on Jesus, "watching Him closely" (Luke 14:1). But Jesus was watching them too.

Before the meal, He healed a man with dropsy, a swelling of the body from fluid, right in front of them, and asked whether any of them would refuse to pull his own son or ox out of a well on the Sabbath. No one answered (Luke 14:2-6). Then, as the guests found their places at the table, Jesus told three parables about banquets. And on the road afterward, He told two more about counting the cost.

In about 40 years of work, I have seen people jockey for titles and credit. Pride has been my biggest downfall through my adult life, and I have felt that pull to be noticed. Chasing the top spot leaves you anxious and empty. Jesus' table parables remind us that real honor comes from serving, not scrambling for rank.

40. Choosing the Places at the Feast

Where to read it: Luke 14:7-14
Who heard it: The guests at a leading Pharisee's dinner, and then the host
What prompted it: Jesus noticed how the guests were choosing the places of honor at the table

Behind the Story: Places of honor at a meal (*Background*)
At a formal dinner in Jesus' day, guests did not sit in chairs. They reclined on couches or cushions around a low table, leaning on the left elbow and eating with the right hand. The places nearest the host were the places of honor. Guests often arrived at different times, and the most important guests might arrive last. Jesus said the scribes loved "first places at the feasts" (Mark 12:39), and the scramble for good seats was a familiar sight.

Jesus watched the guests jostle for the best seats, and He gave them some advice that sounds at first like simple manners.

> *"When you are invited by someone to wedding feasts, do not recline in the first place, lest someone more honored than you has been invited by him, and having come, the one who invited you and him will say to you, 'Give **your** place to this **man**,' and then you will begin with shame to occupy the last place. But when you are invited, having gone, recline in the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, come up higher.' Then you will have glory before those who recline with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted."* (Luke 14:8-11)

Luke calls this a parable (Luke 14:7), and it is more than etiquette. The last line gives it away. "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted." That is how God's kingdom works. God is the host, and He decides where everyone sits. Proverbs had already said it: "Do not honor yourself before a king... for better ***is*** saying to you, 'Come up here,' than putting you low before a noble" (Proverbs 25:6-7).

Then Jesus turned to His host and gave him some advice too. When you give a dinner, don't invite only your friends, your family, and your rich neighbors, who will invite you back. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, who cannot repay you. "And you will be blessed, because they do not have ***anything*** to repay you; for it will be repaid to you in the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:14).

What it means: Pride wants the best seat and the best guest list. Grace takes the low seat and invites people who can give nothing back. Jesus was not just teaching table manners. He was describing Himself. The Son of God took the lowest place of all, and God has highly exalted Him (Philippians 2:5-11).

41. The Great Banquet

Where to read it: Luke 14:15-24
Who heard it: A guest at the Pharisee's dinner, with the others at the table
What prompted it: A guest, hearing about the resurrection of the righteous, said, "Blessed ***is he*** who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"

One of the guests heard Jesus mention the resurrection and spoke up with what sounds like a pious remark. "Blessed ***is he*** who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" (Luke 14:15).

The Jews looked forward to a great feast in the age to come. Isaiah had promised it: "And the LORD of armies will make for all the peoples on this mountain a feast of fat things" (Isaiah 25:6). The man at the table was sure he would be there. Jesus answered with a story that asked him a question: are you sure you really want to come?

> *But He said to him, "A certain man made a great supper and invited many; and at the hour of the supper he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, because all things are now ready.'"* (Luke 14:16-17)

Behind the Story: Two invitations (*Background*)
Bible dictionaries often explain that a large dinner in that culture involved two invitations. The first went out days ahead, so guests could say whether they would come, and the host could decide how many animals to slaughter and how much food to prepare. When everything was ready, a servant went out with a second call: come, it is time. To accept the first invitation and then refuse the second was a public insult to the host. The parable itself shows this pattern: the guests "had been invited" already, and the servant was sent "at the hour of the supper."

And then the excuses start.

> *And they all began with one **accord** to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I have need to go out and see it; I ask you, have me excused.' And another said, 'I have*

> *bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them; I ask you, have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and because of this I am not able to come.'* (Luke 14:18-20)

None of these excuses holds up. Nobody buys a field without looking at it first, and anyway, a field will still be there tomorrow. Nobody buys five pairs of oxen without trying them out, and a man who could afford ten oxen was a wealthy farmer who could easily spare one evening. The man who just married had known about the dinner when he said yes. These are not reasons. They are excuses. The truth is, they simply did not want to come. Each one cared more about his land, his business, or his family than about the man who had invited him.

The master was angry, and rightly so. But he did not cancel the dinner.

> *And having come, that slave reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house, having become angry, said to his slave, 'Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and crippled and lame and blind.' And the slave said, 'Master, it has been done as you commanded, and there is still room.' And the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and hedges and compel **them** to come in, so that my house may be filled.* (Luke 14:21-23)

The servant goes out twice. First into the streets and lanes of the city, to bring in the poor and crippled and lame and blind, the very people Jesus had just told His host to invite. Then, when there is still room, he goes out beyond the city to the roads and hedges, where travelers and outsiders and homeless people would be found.

The word "compel" has a sad history. In the fourth and fifth centuries, it was sometimes used to justify forcing people into the church, and even to use the power of the state against those who disagreed. That is not what Jesus meant. The people on the roads and hedges would never believe a rich man's invitation was really for them. They would hang back out of shame, sure that he could not mean them. The servant has to urge them, persuade them, take them by the arm. It is the compelling of love, not force.

Jesus ends with the master's sad last word: "not one of those men who were invited will taste my supper" (Luke 14:24).

What it means: God has prepared a feast, and the invitation has gone out. In Jesus' day, the first invited guests were the people of Israel, especially the religious leaders who were sitting at that very table. They had God's promises and had been waiting for the kingdom. And now that it had come in Jesus, many of them were too busy to come. So the invitation went out to the people they despised: tax collectors and sinners, the poor and sick, and finally the Gentiles out on the roads beyond Israel.

The guest who blessed those who will eat bread in the kingdom assumed he would be there. Jesus warned him that being invited is not the same as coming. Many people today are like those first guests. They are not against God. They just have other things to do. A job, a house, a family, a hobby. None of those are bad things. But when they keep us from answering God's call, they become our reason for missing the feast.

And here is the good news. There is still room. No one is too poor, too broken, or too far out on the roads to be invited. God wants His house full.

Counting the Cost

After the dinner, Jesus went back out on the road, and great crowds were following Him. He turned around and said some of the hardest words He ever spoke.

> *"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, and yes, even his own life, he is not able to be My disciple. And whoever does not carry his cross and come after Me is not able to be My disciple.* (Luke 14:26-27)

Hate is a strong word, and Jesus chose it on purpose. In Hebrew ways of speaking, to hate one thing compared with another often means to love it less, to put it in second place. Matthew's version makes that clear: "The one who loves father or mother above Me is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:37). Jesus is not telling us to stop loving our families. He commands us to honor our parents and love our wives. He is saying that our love for Him must be so great that every other love looks like hate by comparison. Then He told two short parables to make the point.

42. The Tower Builder

Where to read it: Luke 14:28-30
Who heard it: The great crowds following Him on the road
What prompted it: Jesus had just said that whoever does not carry his own cross cannot be His disciple

> *For which of you, wanting to build a tower, does not first, having sat down, count the cost, whether he has the **means** for completion? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see **it** may begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'* (Luke 14:28-30)

A tower in that day might be a watchtower in a vineyard or a farm building. Laying a foundation and then running out of money was not only a waste, it was a public embarrassment. The unfinished foundation would sit there for years, and everyone who walked by would laugh.

43. The King Going to War

Where to read it: Luke 14:31-33
Who heard it: The great crowds following Him on the road
What prompted it: Same teaching on counting the cost

> *Or what king, going to engage another king in war, does not, having sat down, first consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet the one coming against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while he is still far away, having sent a delegation, he asks the **terms** for peace. So therefore everyone of you who does not renounce all his own possessions is not able to be My disciple.* (Luke 14:31-33)

A wise king does not march out to battle without thinking it through. If his army is half the size of his enemy's, he had better be sure he can win, or else send messengers to make peace while there is still time.

What the two pictures mean together: Jesus did not want crowds. He wanted disciples. Following Him is not a casual decision. It will cost you everything you have, and you need to know that before you start.

Some teachers point out that the two parables make the point from two sides. The tower builder asks whether I can afford to follow Jesus. The king asks whether I can afford not to. A king facing an army twice as large has only two choices: fight and lose, or make peace on the other king's terms. God is the King coming with the greater army. The wise thing is to make peace with Him while He is still far off. Either way, the conclusion is the same: "everyone of you who does not renounce all his own possessions is not able to be My disciple" (Luke 14:33).

And then, as we saw in Chapter 4, Jesus ended with salt. Salt that has lost its taste is good for nothing (Luke 14:34-35). A disciple who starts out and quits halfway is like that. "The one who has ears to hear, let him hear."

The Cost and the Feast

It is striking that Luke puts these two teachings back to back. First a feast where everything is free, and the poor and lame are brought in at no cost. Then a warning that following Jesus will cost you everything.

Both are true. Salvation is a free gift. We cannot pay for a seat at God's table, and we do not have to. But the One who invites us is also our King, and coming to Him means giving Him everything. The excuse makers in the banquet parable were not willing to give up an evening. Jesus asks for our whole lives. And everyone who has truly come to the feast will tell you it was worth it.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think people in Jesus' day, and in ours, care so much about having the best seat? Where do you see this in your own life?
2. Jesus told His host to invite people who could not pay him back. What would it look like for you or your church to do that this month?
3. Look at the three excuses in Luke 14:18-20. Which one sounds most like the excuses people make today for not following Jesus?
4. What does the master's command to "compel them to come in" tell you about God's heart for outsiders?
5. How can salvation be completely free and also cost us everything?
6. Have you counted the cost of following Jesus? What has it cost you so far?

Chapter 15: Lost and Found

> *In the same way, I say to you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*
>
> Luke 15:10 (SLB)

If the parable of the sower is the key to the parables, Luke 15 is their heart. Here Jesus tells three stories in a row about something lost and then found: a sheep, a coin, and a son. Each one ends with a party. And each one answers the same complaint.

> *Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were drawing near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling, saying, "This **man** receives sinners and eats with them."* (Luke 15:1-2)

That is the setting for everything in this chapter. On one side stood people who knew they were sinners and could not stay away from Jesus. On the other side stood people who were sure they were righteous and could not stand the company He kept. "This ***man*** receives sinners and eats with them." They meant it as an insult. It is one of the best summaries of the gospel ever spoken.

Jesus answered them with "this parable" (Luke 15:3), singular, though it comes in three parts. They are really one parable told three ways, each one building on the last.

44. The Lost Sheep

Where to read it: Luke 15:3-7; Matthew 18:12-14
Who heard it: The Pharisees and scribes, with tax collectors and sinners listening; in Matthew, the disciples
What prompted it: The Pharisees and scribes grumbled that Jesus received sinners and ate with them; in Matthew, Jesus was teaching the disciples not to despise little ones

> *What man of you, having a hundred sheep and having lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that has been lost until he finds it? And having found **it**, he lays **it** on his shoulders, rejoicing. And having come into the house, he calls together the friends and the neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, because I have found my sheep that had been lost!'* (Luke 15:4-6)

Notice how Jesus starts. "What man of you." He puts the Pharisees in the story. Any of you who owned sheep would do this. A hundred sheep was a good-sized flock for a family. Losing one was a real loss, and every shepherd would go and look for it.

Behind the Story: Shepherds and sheep (*Background*)

Sheep and goats were the wealth of many families in Israel, and shepherds counted their flocks often, usually as the animals passed into a fold at night. A lost sheep is helpless. It cannot find its way home, and it is easy prey for wild animals. Some sheep, when lost and frightened, simply lie down and refuse to move, which is one reason a shepherd would carry a found sheep on his shoulders. Ironically, shepherds themselves were often looked down on in Jesus' day. Their work kept them away from home and made it hard to keep the ceremonial laws. Yet God called Himself the Shepherd of Israel (Psalm 23:1; 80:1), and through Ezekiel He promised, "The lost I will seek,

and the strayed I will bring back" (Ezekiel 34:16).

The shepherd does not scold the sheep when he finds it. He does not drive it home with a stick. He picks it up and carries it on his shoulders, "rejoicing." And when he gets home, he throws a party.

> *I say to you that in the same way there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, rather than over ninety-nine righteous **ones** who have no need of repentance.* (Luke 15:7)

That last line has a sting in it. "Ninety-nine righteous ***ones*** who have no need of repentance." Jesus is not saying such people exist. Everyone needs to repent. He is talking about people who think they do not need it, like the ones grumbling at that moment. Heaven throws a party over a tax collector who comes home, and the self-righteous stand outside complaining.

Matthew records a similar parable told to the disciples, about a sheep that goes astray. There Jesus applies it to caring for the "little ones" in God's family who wander: "So it is not ***the*** will before your Father who ***is*** in ***the*** heavens that one of these little ones should perish" (Matthew 18:14).

What it means: God goes looking for the lost. Religion is people searching for God. The gospel is God searching for people. And He does not search grudgingly. He searches until He finds, and He carries home what He finds with joy.

45. The Lost Coin

Where to read it: Luke 15:8-10
Who heard it: The Pharisees and scribes, with tax collectors and sinners listening
What prompted it: Same occasion

Jesus told the same story again, this time with a woman, a house, and a coin.

> *Or what woman, having ten drachmas, if she loses one drachma, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek carefully until she finds **it**? And having found **it**, she calls together the friends and the neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, because I have found the drachma that I lost!'* (Luke 15:8-9)

Behind the Story: Ten drachmas (*Background*)

The drachma was a Greek silver coin worth about the same as a Roman denarius, about one day's wage. Ten drachmas may have been most of the savings of a poor family. Many Bible dictionaries add that married women in some parts of the East wore a string of ten coins as a headdress, part of their dowry, so that losing one would be like losing a stone from a wedding ring. That custom is well documented in later times, but we cannot be sure it was the custom in Galilee in Jesus' day. Either way, the coin mattered to her. A village house usually had a dirt floor, often covered with straw or rushes, and only a few small windows, so she had to light a lamp and sweep to find it.

It is worth noticing that Jesus put a woman at the center of this parable, right next to the shepherd. A rabbi in that day would rarely do that. And He uses her to picture God. The care of a poor woman searching every corner of her house for one coin is a picture of how carefully God searches for one lost person.

> *In the same way, I say to you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.* (Luke 15:10)

What it means: The sheep wandered away. The coin did not do anything. It was simply lost, lying in the dark, unable to help itself. Some people are lost through their own foolishness. Others are lost through circumstances, through neglect, or through what others did to them. God searches for both. And when one is found, there is joy in the presence of God's angels. That probably does not mean the angels are the ones rejoicing, though surely they do. It means God Himself rejoices, before them.

46. The Lost Son and the Elder Brother

Where to read it: Luke 15:11-32
Who heard it: The Pharisees and scribes, with tax collectors and sinners listening
What prompted it: Same occasion; the third and longest part of the one parable

And then Jesus told the greatest short story ever told.

The Younger Son Leaves

"A certain man had two sons" (Luke 15:11). The younger son came to his father with a shocking request: "Father, give me the portion of the property that falls ***to me***" (Luke 15:12).

> **Behind the Story: The younger son's share** (*Background*)
> Under the Law of Moses, the firstborn son received a double share of the inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:17). So if there were two sons, the younger would get one third of the estate. Normally, an inheritance was passed on at the father's death. A father could divide his property while he was still alive, but to ask for it was, in effect, to tell your father you wished he were dead. Many teachers who have studied village life in the Middle East say that such a request would still be seen as a terrible insult today. Jesus' listeners would have expected the father to refuse, and maybe to throw the son out.

The father did not refuse. He divided his livelihood between them. And within a few days, the younger son turned his share into cash and left for a distant country, a Gentile land, far from his father and far from God's people. There "he squandered his property, living recklessly" (Luke 15:13). His brother later says he spent it "with prostitutes" (Luke 15:30).

Then the money ran out, and a famine hit. The young man went to work for a Gentile farmer, who sent him into the fields to feed pigs. For a Jewish listener, this is as low as a person can go. Pigs were unclean animals under the Law (Leviticus 11:7). And he was so hungry that he envied the pigs their food, the carob pods they ate, and no one gave him anything.

He Came to Himself

> *But having come to himself, he said, 'How many hired servants of my father have an abundance of bread, but I am perishing with hunger! Having risen up, I will go to my father and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants."'* (Luke 15:17-19)

“Having come to himself.” That is a wonderful phrase. Sin is a kind of madness. It makes us forget who we are and where we belong. Repentance begins when we come to our senses.

Notice that his motives were not all pure. He was hungry. He was thinking about bread. And he planned to work off his debt as a hired servant. But he also knew he had sinned against heaven and against his father, and he was ready to say so. That was enough to get him on the road home.

The Father Runs

> *And having risen up, he went to his own father. But while he was still far distant, his father saw him and was moved with compassion, and having run, he fell on his neck and kissed him.* (Luke 15:20)

This is the turning point of the whole story, and it is one of the most moving verses in the Bible. The father saw him “while he was still far distant.” That means he had been watching the road. Day after day, he had been looking for his son.

And then he ran. In that culture, a dignified older man did not run. He wore long robes, and running meant hiking them up and showing his legs, which was considered shameful. A great man walked slowly and let others come to him. This father did not care. He ran down the road, threw his arms around his son’s neck, and kissed him over and over, before the boy could say a word.

The son began his speech: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Luke 15:21). But notice what he left out. He never got to say, “Make me like one of your hired servants.” His father interrupted him.

> *But the father said to his slaves, ‘Bring out the best robe and clothe him, and give a ring for his hand and sandals for **his** feet; and having brought the fattened calf, kill **it**, and having eaten, let us be merry; because this son of mine was dead and came to life again, and he was lost and was found.’ And they began to be merry.* (Luke 15:22-24)

The best robe was the father’s own robe, or the finest in the house. The ring was likely a signet ring, a sign of authority in the family. Sandals marked him as a son, since servants often went barefoot. And the fattened calf, kept for the biggest celebrations, would feed the whole village. The son came home hoping to be a servant. He was welcomed back as a son.

The Elder Brother

If the story ended there, it would be a beautiful picture of God’s grace. But Jesus did not end it there, because the Pharisees and scribes were still standing in front of Him, grumbling.

The older son was out in the field working, as he always was. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. A servant told him what had happened, and he was furious. He would not go in.

And the father came out to him too. The same father who ran to the younger son now goes out to plead with the older one.

> *But answering, he said to the father, 'Look, so many years I have been serving you, and I never transgressed a commandment of yours, and to me you never gave a young goat, so that I might be merry with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.'* (Luke 15:29-30)

Listen to him. "So many years I have been serving you." He did not think of himself as a son but as a slave. "I never transgressed a commandment of yours." He was proud of his record. "You never gave a young goat." He felt cheated. And notice that he would not call his brother "my brother." He called him "this son of yours."

The father answered him gently.

> *And he said to him, 'Child, you are always with me, and all that **is** mine is yours. But it was necessary to be merry and to rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and came to life again, and was lost and was found.'* (Luke 15:31-32)

And then the story ends. We never learn whether the older brother went in. Like the barren fig tree in Luke 13, Jesus left the ending open, because the older brother was standing right in front of Him. Would the Pharisees and scribes come in to the feast, or stay outside, angry that God welcomes sinners?

Two Lost Sons

We call this the parable of the prodigal son, but it is really a story about a father and two lost sons. One was lost in the far country, and he knew it. The other was lost at home, and he did not know it. One broke every rule. The other kept every rule. And both of them were far from their father's heart.

The younger son thought he could find happiness by getting away from his father. The older son thought he could earn his father's favor by working hard and obeying. Both were wrong. Neither one understood the father's love. The younger son came home expecting to earn his way back as a hired servant. The older son stayed home as though he were a hired servant all along.

That is a picture of two ways people try to run their own lives without God. One is the way of open rebellion. The other is the way of proud religion. Jesus said the tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the kingdom ahead of the religious leaders (Matthew 21:31), because they knew they needed grace.

What It Means

God is the running Father. This is the heart of the parable. God is not a reluctant judge waiting with folded arms for us to grovel. He watches the road. He runs. He welcomes us home as sons and daughters, not servants. And He throws a party.

Repentance means coming home. It is not just feeling bad. It is coming to yourself, getting up, and going back to the Father, with nothing to offer but a confession.

Grace offends the self-righteous. If you have ever felt that someone did not deserve God's forgiveness, you have felt what the older brother felt. Grace is not fair. That is what makes it grace.

The Father goes out to both. This may be the most surprising thing in the story. The father does not just love the rebel. He goes out and pleads with the proud son too. God's invitation is open to everyone, the people who have made a mess of their lives and the people who think they have it all together.

The Three Parables Together

What was lost	How many	Who searched	What happened when found
A sheep	1 out of 100	A shepherd	He carried it home rejoicing and called his friends
A coin	1 out of 10	A woman	She called her friends to rejoice with her
A son	1 out of 2, then the other	A father	He ran, welcomed him, and threw a feast, then went out to plead with the elder son

Notice how the stakes rise: one in a hundred, then one in ten, then one in two. And notice the last story adds something the first two do not have: a person who refuses to rejoice. That is where Jesus wanted His hearers to see themselves.

Study Questions

1. Read Luke 15:1-2. Why were the Pharisees so bothered that Jesus ate with sinners?
2. What is the difference between the way the sheep was lost, the way the coin was lost, and the way the son was lost? Have you known people lost in each of those ways?
3. Why is it so significant that the father ran? What does that tell you about God?
4. The younger son never got to finish his speech about being a hired servant. Why do you think the father interrupted him?
5. In what ways are you more like the older brother than you would like to admit?
6. The story ends without telling us whether the older brother went in. If you were writing the ending, what would you want him to do? What would it take?

Chapter 16: Money and Eternity

> *No household servant is able to serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You are not able to serve God and wealth.*
>
> Luke 16:13 (SLB)

Luke 16 has two parables that both begin with the same words: "There was a certain rich man" (Luke 16:1, 19). Both are about money, and both are about what happens when time runs out. The first is probably the most puzzling parable Jesus ever told. The second is one of the most frightening. Together they teach us to use what we have now with our eyes on eternity.

Luke tells us who was listening. The first parable was spoken "to His disciples" (Luke 16:1). But the Pharisees were listening too, and Luke says they were "lovers of money" who "were ridiculing Him" (Luke 16:14). The second parable was aimed at them.

47. The Shrewd Manager

Where to read it: Luke 16:1-13
Who heard it: The disciples, with the Pharisees listening
What prompted it: Teaching that followed the three parables of the lost in Luke 15

> *And He was also saying to His disciples, "There was a certain rich man who had a manager, and this **man** was accused to him as squandering his possessions. And having called him, he said to him, 'What **is** this I hear about you? Give the account of your management, for you will not be able to manage any longer.'"* (Luke 16:1-2)

A manager in this story was the steward of a rich man's estate, perhaps a large farm with tenants who paid their rent in olive oil and wheat. He was trusted with his master's business, and he had been wasting it. Now he was fired, and he had to turn in his books.

He thought fast. "I am not able to dig; I am ashamed to beg" (Luke 16:3). He was too soft for hard labor and too proud for the street. Then he had an idea. While he still had the account books in his hands, he called in his master's debtors one by one.

> *And having called to **him** each one of the debtors of his own master, he was saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' And he said, 'Approximately 600 gallons (a hundred baths) of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and having sat down quickly, write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And you, how much do you owe?' And he said, 'Approximately 600 bushels (a hundred kors) of wheat.' And he says to him, 'Take your bill and write eighty.'* (Luke 16:5-7)

Behind the Story: Oil and wheat (*Background*)

The SLB's notes give the amounts in modern measure: about 600 gallons of olive oil and about 600 bushels of wheat. These were large debts, the kind owed by a big tenant farmer or a merchant. Cutting the oil bill in half saved about 300 gallons. Cutting the wheat by a fifth saved about 120 bushels. Bible dictionaries estimate that

each reduction was worth something like a year or more of a working man's wages. Some scholars suggest the manager was only cutting out his own commission or a hidden interest charge that the Law forbade (Deuteronomy 23:19), so that the master lost nothing he was owed. That is an interesting idea, but the parable does not say so, and Jesus calls him "the manager of unrighteousness."

By the time the master found out, every debtor in the area was grateful to the manager. They would welcome him into their homes. And the master could hardly take it back without looking stingy in front of the whole village.

Then comes the most surprising line in the parable.

> *And the master praised the manager of unrighteousness because he had acted shrewdly; because the sons of this age are more shrewd than the sons of the light in their own generation.* (Luke 16:8)

Praised for What?

Many readers stumble here. Is Jesus praising dishonesty? No. The master in the story praised the manager, and notice what he praised him for. Not for honesty. He was "the manager of unrighteousness," a crook to the end. The master praised him "because he had acted shrewdly." He saw that his time was short, he understood what was coming, and he used what was in his hands now to prepare for his future.

Then Jesus makes His point: "the sons of this age are more shrewd than the sons of the light in their own generation." Worldly people are often smarter about planning for their earthly future than God's people are about planning for eternity. They work hard to set up their retirement. They make connections. They think ahead. Christians, who know that this life is short and eternity is long, often live as though this life is all there is.

> *And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when you fail, they may receive you into the eternal tents.* (Luke 16:9)

"The wealth of unrighteousness" is money, the wealth of this fallen world. It is not evil in itself, but it belongs to a world that is passing away, and it often tempts us to sin. Jesus says to use it now to make friends who will welcome you "into the eternal tents." That means using money for God's kingdom and for people, especially people in need, in ways that will last forever. One day the money will fail us. We cannot take it with us. But the people we helped, and the treasure we laid up in heaven, will be waiting.

> *The one **who is** faithful in very little is faithful also in much; and the one **who is** unrighteous in very little is unrighteous also in much. If therefore you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true **riches**? And if you have not been faithful in that which **is** another's, who will give you that which **is** your own? No household servant is able to serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You are not able to serve God and wealth.* (Luke 16:10-13)

What it means: Money is a test. It is "very little" compared with the true riches of God's kingdom, and it belongs to Someone else. We are only managers. The way we handle it shows whether we can be trusted with more. And in the end, there are only two masters. Either we use money to serve God, or money

becomes our god and we serve it. Like the manager, we will all be called to give an account (Romans 14:12). The question is whether we will have used what we were given with eternity in mind.

The Pharisees Scoff

The Pharisees heard all of this and sneered. Luke tells us why: they were "lovers of money" (Luke 16:14). Many of them believed that wealth was a sign of God's blessing and that poverty was a sign of His displeasure. So a teacher who said to give it away to make friends for eternity sounded foolish to them.

Jesus answered them sharply. "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts; because that which ***is*** exalted among men is an abomination before God" (Luke 16:15). Then He told them a story.

48. The Rich Man and Lazarus

Where to read it: Luke 16:19-31
Who heard it: The Pharisees, who loved money and were ridiculing Him, with the disciples present
What prompted it: The Pharisees scoffed at His teaching about using money for eternity

> *Now there was a certain rich man, and he was clothed in purple and fine linen, making merry in splendor every day. And there was a certain poor man named Lazarus, who had been laid at his gate, covered with sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs that were falling from the table of the rich man; but even the dogs, coming, were licking his sores.* (Luke 16:19-21)

Behind the Story: Purple and fine linen (*Text confirmed*)
Purple cloth was dyed with a color taken from sea snails, mainly along the coast of Tyre, and it took thousands of snails to dye a single garment. That is why purple was the color of kings. Pliny the Elder quotes the Roman writer Cornelius Nepos on prices in his own young days, about a hundred years before Jesus: "the double-dyed Tyrian purple, which it was impossible to buy for 1000 denarii per pound" (Natural History 9.63, Rackham translation). A thousand denarii was about three years' wages for a working man. Fine linen, often imported from Egypt, was the softest and most costly cloth for underclothes. A man who dressed in purple and fine linen every day was among the richest of the rich.

The two men could not be more different. One wore purple. The other wore sores. One feasted every day. The other dreamed of crumbs. One had a gate. The other lay outside it. The dogs, which Jews considered unclean scavengers, licked Lazarus's wounds, and he was too weak to push them away.

And here is a detail that is easy to miss. The rich man has no name. The poor man does. In this world, everyone knew the rich man's name and no one knew the beggar's. In God's eyes it was the other way around. The name Lazarus is a form of the Hebrew Eleazar, which means "God helps." No one else did.

The Great Reversal

> *And it came to pass that the poor man died and was carried away by the angels into the bosom of Abraham; and the rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades, having lifted up his eyes, being in torments, he sees Abraham from afar, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he, having called*

> *out, said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus, so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in anguish in this flame.'* (Luke 16:22-24)

Then everything turns over. The beggar was carried by angels to Abraham's side. In Jewish thought, to be at Abraham's side, or in his bosom, meant to be at the place of honor at the great feast, reclining next to the father of the faithful, and to be at peace. The rich man "was buried," which probably means he had a fine funeral. And then he woke up in torment.

He still treats Lazarus like a servant. "Send Lazarus." Even in the flame, he expects the beggar to wait on him. Abraham's answer is gentle and final.

> *But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you received your good things in your lifetime, and Lazarus likewise the bad things; but now he is comforted, and you are in anguish. And besides all these things, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to cross over from here to you may not be able, nor may those from there pass over to us.'*
> (Luke 16:25-26)

Two things are clear. First, death fixes a person's destiny. There is a great chasm, and no one can cross it. There is no second chance after death. "It is appointed to men to die once, and after this, judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). Second, the rich man was not condemned for being rich. Abraham himself was very rich (Genesis 13:2). He was condemned because his riches made him blind and deaf to the man at his gate, and to the God who had put him there. The love of money had shut his heart.

Five Brothers

Now the rich man thinks of his family.

> *And he said, 'Then I ask you, father, that you send him to the house of my father—for I have five brothers—so that he may testify thoroughly to them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' Abraham says to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from **the** dead, they will repent.' But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from **the** dead.'* (Luke 16:27-31)

This is the sharpest point of the parable, and it was aimed straight at the Pharisees. They kept asking Jesus for a sign (Luke 11:16, 29). The rich man thought his brothers would believe if someone came back from the dead. Abraham said no. If they would not listen to Moses and the Prophets, the Scriptures they already had, a miracle would not change their hearts.

The proof came soon. Jesus raised a man who was really named Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, from the dead at Bethany (John 11). And the chief priests responded by plotting to kill Lazarus too (John 12:10-11). Then Jesus Himself rose from the dead, and many still did not believe.

Parable or True Story?

Bible-believing teachers have long asked whether this is a parable or an account of two real men. I think the question deserves an honest answer.

Some point out that this is the only parable where a character has a name, and that Luke does not call it a parable. They believe Jesus was describing real people and real events, and that we should read every detail as a literal picture of the afterlife.

Others point out that the story begins with the same words as the parable of the shrewd manager just before it, "There was a certain rich man," and that Luke often strings parables together without labeling each one. They suggest that Jesus gave the beggar a name for a reason, because of its meaning, and so the rich man would have none.

I lean toward reading it as a parable, but a parable that teaches real truth. Jesus never told a parable that misled His hearers about the facts of life and death. Whether these were two particular men or not, the story teaches that there is conscious life after death, that there is a real place of torment and a real place of comfort, that destiny is fixed at death, and that God's word is enough to lead us to repentance. I would caution against building a detailed map of the afterlife from every detail, such as whether people in torment can see and talk with people in comfort. The Bible's clear teaching on heaven and hell is found in many other places. On the main points, whichever view you take, the message is the same.

What It Means

What we do with what we have matters forever. The rich man had everything he needed to help Lazarus, and he did nothing. He did not beat him or drive him away. He just ignored him. Many people will be lost not because of the evil they did, but because of the good they never bothered to do.

This life is the time to decide. After death, the chasm is fixed. The time to repent is now.

God's word is enough. We do not need a vision, a dream, or a visitor from the dead. We have Moses and the Prophets, and we also have the Gospels and the letters of the apostles. And we have a witness the rich man's brothers did not have: Someone has risen from the dead. If we will not hear Him, nothing else will move us.

Study Questions

1. What exactly did the master praise the shrewd manager for? What did he not praise him for?
2. Jesus said, "make friends for yourselves by the wealth of unrighteousness." What are some ways you can use money now that will matter in eternity?
3. Read Luke 16:10-13. Why does Jesus call money "very little"? What are the "true riches"?
4. The rich man never hurt Lazarus. Why was he condemned?
5. Why do you think Abraham said that even a person rising from the dead would not convince the five brothers?
6. Who is lying at your gate? Who has God put close to you that you may have been too busy to see?

Chapter 17: Prayer, Pride, and Humility

> *I say to you, this one went down to his house justified rather than that one; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.*
>
> Luke 18:14 (SLB)

As Jesus came closer to Jerusalem, He told three short parables about the posture of a servant of God. The first is about the servant who does his duty and expects no thanks. The second is about a widow who would not stop asking. The third is about two men who went up to the temple to pray, and only one of them went home right with God. All three are about the heart we bring to God: humble, persistent, and honest about our need.

49. The Unworthy Servants

Where to read it: Luke 17:7-10
Who heard it: The apostles
What prompted it: The apostles had just said, "Add faith to us!" after Jesus told them to forgive a brother who sins against them seven times in a day

Jesus had just told the apostles that if a brother sins against you seven times in one day and comes back seven times saying, "I repent," you must forgive him (Luke 17:3-4). They were staggered. "Add faith to us!" they said (Luke 17:5). Jesus told them that even faith as small as a mustard seed could uproot a mulberry tree (Luke 17:6). Then He told them a short parable.

> *Now which of you, having a slave plowing or shepherding, who will say to him when he has come in out of the field, 'Having come immediately, recline **at table**'? But will he not say to him, 'Prepare what I may dine on, and having girded yourself, serve me until I eat and drink; and after these things you will eat and drink'? Does he have thanks for that slave because he did the things commanded him? I think not. So you also, when you have done all the things commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves, for we have done what we were obligated to do.'*
> (Luke 17:7-10)

This parable can sound harsh to modern ears. We live in a world of employee appreciation days and thank-you notes. But in Jesus' world, a slave who plowed all day and then came in to cook supper was simply doing his job. No one threw him a party for it.

What it means: We can never put God in our debt. Even if we did everything He commanded, perfectly, we would only have done what we owed Him. There is no room for pride in the Christian life, no room to think God owes us something because we forgave someone, or served faithfully, or gave generously. This is a healthy correction for anyone who has served a long time and begins to feel that God should pay up.

But we should hold this parable next to the one in Luke 12, where the master comes home, ties on an apron, and serves his own servants (Luke 12:37). Both are true. We have no claim on God. And yet our Master is so gracious that He will reward us far beyond anything we deserve. Paul said, "each will receive

his own reward according to ***his*** own labor" (1 Corinthians 3:8). The reward is pure grace, given to servants who never earned it.

50. The Persistent Widow

Where to read it: Luke 18:1-8
Who heard it: The disciples
What prompted it: Jesus had been speaking about the days before His return, when life would seem normal and the Son of Man would come suddenly (Luke 17:20-37)

Luke tells us the point of this parable before it even begins. Jesus told it "about its being necessary always to pray and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1).

> *saying, "There was a certain judge in a certain city, not fearing God and not respecting man. Now there was a widow in that city, and she was coming to him, saying, 'Avenge me of my adversary.' And he was not willing for a time; but after these things he said within himself, 'Even if I do not fear God and do not respect man, yet because this widow causes me trouble, I will avenge her, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'"* (Luke 18:2-5)

Behind the Story: Widows and judges (*Background*)
In the Old Testament, widows were among the most helpless people in society, along with orphans and foreigners. A widow had no husband to speak for her in court, and often no money to pay a bribe. God repeatedly commanded Israel to protect them, and warned that He Himself would hear their cry (Exodus 22:22-24; Deuteronomy 10:18). Judges were commanded to judge fairly and take no bribes (Deuteronomy 16:18-20). The judge in this parable is the opposite of what God required. He was "not fearing God and not respecting man." He had no conscience toward God and no concern for what people thought of him.

The widow has one weapon: she will not go away. She keeps coming. The phrase translated "wear me out" is a strong one. In Greek it is a boxing term that means to strike under the eye, to give a black eye. The judge is not really afraid she will hit him. He is afraid she will wear him down or embarrass him in public. So he gives her justice just to be rid of her.

> *And the Lord said, "Hear what the judge of unrighteousness says. And will God by no means execute the avenging of His elect, those crying out to Him day and night, and being patient toward them? I say to you that He will execute the avenging of them with speed. Nevertheless, the Son of Man, having come, will He find the faith on the earth?"* (Luke 18:6-8)

What it means: This is a how-much-more parable, and the comparison is a contrast. God is not like the judge. The judge did not care. God cares. The judge was unjust. God is perfectly just. The widow was a stranger to the judge. We are God's "elect," His chosen and beloved people. If even a corrupt judge will finally do what is right for a widow who keeps asking, how much more will our Father answer His children who cry out to Him day and night?

Jesus says He will answer "with speed." That may surprise us, because it often seems that God's answers are slow. But the word can also mean suddenly. When God acts, He will act decisively. And in light of eternity, the waiting is short.

The parable is set in the context of Jesus' return. Just before it, Jesus was teaching about the days before He comes back (Luke 17:22-37). The cry for justice, "Avenge me of my adversary," is the cry of God's people in a world where evil seems to win. In the end, God will set everything right when Jesus returns. The souls of the martyrs in Revelation cry out with the same prayer: "Until when, O Master, the Holy and the True, do You not judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:10). Until then, we pray and do not lose heart.

And then Jesus ends with a searching question: "Nevertheless, the Son of Man, having come, will He find the faith on the earth?" The issue is not whether God is faithful to answer. The issue is whether we will keep praying and keep trusting until He does.

51. The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Where to read it: Luke 18:9-14
Who heard it: Some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and looked down on others
What prompted it: Jesus aimed it at people who were sure they were righteous and despised everyone else

Once again Luke tells us the audience before the story starts.

> *And He also spoke this parable to some who had trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and were despising the rest: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector."* (Luke 18:9-10)

Jesus' listeners would have expected the Pharisee to be the hero. The Pharisees were the most respected religious people in Israel. They studied the Law carefully and tried to obey it in every detail. Tax collectors, as we saw in Chapter 5, were considered traitors and thieves.

Behind the Story: The Pharisees (*Text confirmed*)

The Pharisees were a movement of Jewish laymen and teachers devoted to keeping the Law of Moses and the traditions of the elders with great care. Josephus, who says he chose to live by the Pharisees' rules himself, also wrote of them in less flattering terms in one place, describing "a certain sect of men that were Jews, who valued themselves highly upon the exact skill they had in the law of their fathers, and made men believe they were highly favored by God" (Antiquities 17.2.4, Whiston translation).

Not every Pharisee was proud. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night (John 3:1-2), Gamaliel urged the council to leave the apostles alone (Acts 5:34-39), and Paul was a Pharisee before he met Christ (Philippians 3:5). Jesus was not condemning a group of people for who they were. He was exposing a sin that can grow in any religious heart.

> *The Pharisee, having stood, was praying these things to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like the rest of men, swindlers, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice in the week; I tithe all things, as many as I acquire.'* (Luke 18:11-12)

Notice that the Pharisee "was praying these things to himself." His prayer was addressed to God, but it was really a speech to himself about himself. He thanked God, but not for anything God had done. He thanked God for how good he was. And he did more than the Law required. The Law commanded one fast a year, on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29). He fasted twice a week. The Law commanded a tithe of crops and herds. He tithed everything he got. On the outside, he was a model of religion.

And then, in the middle of his prayer, he glanced over at the tax collector and used him as a measuring stick. “I am not like the rest of men... or even like this tax collector.”

> *And the tax collector, having stood far off, was not willing to lift up even **his** eyes to heaven, but was striking his breast, saying, ‘God, be propitious to me, the sinner!’* (Luke 18:13)

The tax collector stood “far off,” at a distance from the holy place, and maybe from the Pharisee too. He would not lift his eyes. He beat his breast, a sign of grief and shame. And he prayed one of the shortest prayers in the Bible.

“God, be propitious to me, the sinner!” The SLB uses a word most of us do not use every day. To be propitious means to be favorable, to turn away anger and show mercy. The Greek word here, *hilaskomai*, is connected to the place of atonement in the temple, the mercy seat, where the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement. The same family of words is used of Jesus: “He Himself is ***the*** propitiation for our sins” (1 John 2:2). The tax collector was asking God to accept a sacrifice for him and to turn away the wrath he deserved. And notice the word “the.” He did not call himself a sinner, as if he were one of many. He called himself the sinner, as if he were the only one.

> *I say to you, this one went down to his house justified rather than that one; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.* (Luke 18:14)

“Justified” means declared righteous, accepted by God as if he had never sinned. The man who had done everything right went home unchanged. The man who had done everything wrong and admitted it went home right with God.

What it means: This parable is the gospel in miniature. We are not made right with God by comparing ourselves to others, or by piling up good works, or by being more religious than the next person. We are made right with God by admitting we are sinners and throwing ourselves on His mercy, trusting in the sacrifice He provided. Paul would spend whole letters explaining what Jesus says here in one story: “a man is not justified by works of law except through faith of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 2:16).

There is a trap in this parable, and it is an easy one to fall into. It is possible to read it and thank God that we are not like that Pharisee. The moment we do that, we have become him.

The Heart God Hears

Put the three parables together. The unworthy servant knows he has no claim on God. The widow knows she has nowhere else to go. The tax collector knows he has nothing to offer but his sin. All three come with empty hands. And that is exactly the kind of person God hears. “The sacrifices of God ***are*** a broken spirit; a broken and crushed heart, God, You will not despise” (Psalm 51:17).

Study Questions

1. Is there an area of your service to God where you have started to feel that He owes you something? How does Luke 17:7-10 speak to that?
2. Why do you think Jesus used an unjust judge to teach about prayer? What is the contrast He wants us to see?

3. What are you praying about that has tempted you to “lose heart”? What does this parable say to you?

4. Read the Pharisee’s prayer in Luke 18:11-12 again. How many times does he say “I”? How many times does he ask God for anything?

5. Why is it so easy to compare ourselves to other people when we think about our standing with God?

6. Pray the tax collector’s prayer this week, slowly and honestly. What happens in your heart when you do?

Chapter 18: Generous Grace and Faithful Service

Thus the last will be first, and the first last; for many are called, but few chosen.
Matthew 20:16 (SLB)

As Jesus came down the Jordan valley toward Jericho and the climb to Jerusalem, two of His parables answered two questions that were on His disciples' minds. Peter wanted to know what the disciples would get for leaving everything. The crowd wanted to know if the kingdom was about to appear right away. The first answer was a story about a landowner whose generosity offended the people he paid. The second was a story about a nobleman who went away to receive a kingdom, with Jericho's own history in the background.

Everything I have from God is grace, not wages I earned. I know that better than most, given how far I drifted and how much He forgave. Comparing our long road to someone else's blessing blinds us to how good God has been to us.

52. The Workers in the Vineyard

Where to read it: Matthew 20:1-16
Who heard it: Peter and the disciples
What prompted it: Peter said, "Look, we have left all things and followed You; what then will there be for us?"

A rich young ruler had just walked away from Jesus sad, because he had great possessions and would not give them up (Matthew 19:16-22). Jesus told the disciples how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom. Then Peter spoke up.

> *Then Peter, answering, said to Him, "Look, we have left all things and followed You; what then will there be for us?"* (Matthew 19:27)

Jesus gave him a wonderful promise. The Twelve would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel, and everyone who had left anything for His sake would receive a hundred times as much and inherit eternal life (Matthew 19:28-29). But then He added a warning: "But many first will be last, and last first" (Matthew 19:30). And He told a story to explain it.

> *For the kingdom of the heavens is like a man, a master of a house, who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. And having agreed with the workers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard.* (Matthew 20:1-2)

Behind the Story: Day laborers and the hours of the day (*Background*)

In Jesus' day, men who owned no land often waited in the village marketplace at dawn hoping to be hired for the day, especially in the busy seasons of harvest and grape picking. The Jews counted the hours of daylight from about six in the morning, so the third hour was about nine, the sixth hour was noon, the ninth hour was three in the afternoon, and the eleventh hour was about five, with only one hour of work left before sundown. The Law required that a hired worker be paid before the sun went down, because he was poor and counting on it (Deuteronomy 24:14-15). A denarius, as we saw in Chapter 5, was the usual wage for a full day's work, enough to

feed a family for a day.

The landowner went back to the marketplace again and again: at nine, at noon, at three. Each time, he sent more men into his vineyard, promising to pay "whatever may be right." And then, at five in the afternoon, he found men still standing there.

> *And about the eleventh hour, having gone out, he found others standing idle, and he says to them, 'Why have you stood here all the day idle?' They say to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He says to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.'* (Matthew 20:6-7)

These were the men nobody wanted. Maybe they were old, or weak, or had a bad reputation. All day long they had watched others get hired, and they were going to go home with nothing. Their families would go hungry. And the landowner sent them into the vineyard too, with one hour of daylight left.

Then evening came, and payday. The landowner did something strange. He told his foreman to pay the last ones first.

> *And those **hired** about the eleventh hour, having come, received each a denarius. And the first, having come, thought that they would receive more; and they themselves also received each a denarius. And having received **it**, they were grumbling against the master of the house, saying, 'These last worked one hour, and you made them equal to us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'* (Matthew 20:9-12)

You can feel their anger. And if we are honest, we feel it too. It does not seem fair. Those who worked twelve hours in the burning sun got the same pay as those who worked one hour in the cool of the evening.

> *But he, answering, said to one of them, 'Friend, I do not wrong you. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what **is** yours and go. But I wish to give to this last **one** as also to you. Or is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what **is** mine? Is your eye evil because I am good?'* (Matthew 20:13-15)

"Is your eye evil because I am good?" That is a Hebrew way of speaking. An "evil eye" is a jealous, grudging eye, the eye that looks at someone else's blessing and resents it. We met the same idea in the lamp of the body in Chapter 4.

What it means: This parable is not about wages or labor law. It is about grace. No one in the story was cheated. The first workers got exactly what they agreed to. The last workers got far more than they earned. The problem was not that the landowner was unfair to anyone. The problem was that he was generous to some, and that offended the others.

God's salvation works like that. Eternal life is not a wage we earn by hours of service. It is a gift. The thief on the cross, who believed in the last hour of his life, entered paradise the same day Jesus did (Luke 23:42-43). A person who comes to Christ at eighty receives the same eternal life as one who came to Him at eight. That is good news for every latecomer, and it is a warning to every old-timer. The moment

we start thinking we deserve more because we have served longer, we have become the grumbling workers.

This was a needed word for Peter. He had left everything, and Jesus did promise a great reward. But the disciples must never start thinking of themselves as the first-hired who deserve more. The tax collectors and sinners pouring into the kingdom, and soon the Gentiles, were the eleventh-hour workers. And there would be the same generous welcome for them.

The very end of the parable is the hardest line to take: "Thus the last will be first, and the first last" (Matthew 20:16). In God's kingdom, everything is upside down. The ones who think they have earned first place may find themselves last, and the ones who know they deserve nothing receive everything.

Jericho

Jesus then went on toward Jerusalem with the Twelve, telling them a third time that He would be handed over, mocked, flogged, crucified, and raised on the third day (Matthew 20:17-19). James and John asked for the best seats in His kingdom (Matthew 20:20-28). He healed blind Bartimaeus on the road near Jericho (Mark 10:46-52). And in Jericho itself He went to the house of a chief tax collector named Zacchaeus, who repented and gave half of his goods to the poor (Luke 19:1-10). "for the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which has been lost" (Luke 19:10).

Jericho was about seventeen miles from Jerusalem, the last stop before the climb up to the city. Excitement must have been high. The crowds knew Jesus was heading for Jerusalem, and many of them believed He was the Messiah. They expected that when He got there, He would take the throne.

53. The Ten Minas

Where to read it: Luke 19:11-27
Who heard it: The crowd in and around Jericho, including the disciples
What prompted it: Because He was near Jerusalem, and "they were thinking that the kingdom of God was about to appear immediately"

> *Now while they were hearing these things, having added, He spoke a parable, because of His being near Jerusalem, and because they were thinking that the kingdom of God was about to appear immediately. Therefore He said, "A certain man of noble birth went to a distant country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return."* (Luke 19:11-12)

Every adult in that crowd knew a story like this one, because it had happened in their own lifetime, and it had started in the very town where they were standing.

Behind the Story: Archelaus goes to Rome for a kingdom (*Text confirmed*)

When Herod the Great died in 4 B.C., his will named his son Archelaus as king. But a king under Rome had to be approved by Caesar, so Archelaus had to travel to Rome to receive his kingdom. Before he left, he put down a riot at the temple during Passover with such force that his "horsemen slew three thousand men" (Antiquities 17.9.3). Josephus tells what happened next: "an embassage of the Jews was come to Rome... that they might petition for the liberty of living by their own laws," and "the number of the ambassadors that were sent by the authority of the nation were fifty" (Antiquities 17.11.1). They asked Caesar not to give Archelaus the throne.

Augustus split the difference. He made Archelaus "not indeed to be king of the whole country, but ethnarch of the one half of that which had been subject to Herod, and promised to give him the royal dignity hereafter, if he governed his part virtuously" (Antiquities 17.11.4). When Archelaus came home, Josephus says, "he also magnificently rebuilt the royal palace that had been at Jericho" (Antiquities 17.13.1). He ruled so harshly that in his tenth year his own people accused him before Caesar again, and Augustus "banished him" to Vienne in Gaul (Antiquities 17.13.2).

We cannot prove Jesus had Archelaus in mind, and the parable is not a retelling of his life. But a nobleman going to a far country to receive a kingdom, a delegation of citizens following to say they did not want him, and a harsh return were all real history to Jesus' listeners, and the rebuilt palace of Archelaus stood in Jericho as He spoke.

The nobleman called ten of his servants and gave each one a mina, a sum of money worth about a hundred days' wages, and told them, "Do business until I come" (Luke 19:13). Then he left. And his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, "We do not want this ***man*** to reign over us" (Luke 19:14).

He came back, having received the kingdom. And he called his servants to account.

> *And the first came up, saying, 'Master, your mina has gained ten minas more.' And he said to him, 'Well done, good slave! Because you were faithful in a very little, be one having authority over ten cities.' And the second came, saying, 'Master, your mina has made five minas.' And he said also to this one, 'And you, be over five cities.'* (Luke 19:16-19)

Then came a third servant.

> *And another came, saying, 'Master, look, your mina, which I was keeping laid away in a cloth; for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man: you take up what you did not lay down, and you reap what you did not sow.' And he says to him, 'Out of your mouth I will judge you, evil slave. You knew that I am a harsh man, taking up what I did not lay down and reaping what I did not sow. And why did you not give my money to the bank, and I, having come, would have collected it with interest?'* (Luke 19:20-23)

The nobleman took the mina from him and gave it to the one who had ten. When the bystanders objected, he answered with a principle Jesus had taught before: "to everyone who has, ***more*** will be given; but from the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him" (Luke 19:26). And the parable ends with judgment on the citizens who had rejected his rule.

> *But those enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring **them** here and slay **them** before me.'* (Luke 19:27)

What it means: Jesus told this parable to correct a wrong idea. The crowd thought the kingdom would appear right away, as soon as He reached Jerusalem. Jesus told them that the King must first go away to a far country to receive His kingdom, and then come back. That is exactly what happened. A few days later, Jesus was crucified, rose from the dead, and ascended to the Father's right hand, where He has received all authority (Matthew 28:18; Daniel 7:13-14). And He will return to reign.

In the meantime, there are three kinds of people in the story.

The faithful servants used what they were given to serve their master while he was away. Each of them received the same amount, one mina. That may picture the gospel itself, or the life and opportunity every believer is given. Their faithfulness produced different results, and they were rewarded in proportion: ten cities, five cities. The reward for faithful service in a small thing is a larger responsibility in the kingdom.

The fearful servant did nothing. He hid what he was given in a cloth. His excuse was that he was afraid of his master, whom he called "a harsh man." But his excuse condemned him. If he really believed that, he would have at least put the money in the bank. The truth is that he did not love his master and did not care about his business. He had the outward place of a servant but the heart of an enemy.

The rebellious citizens openly refused the king. "We do not want this ***man*** to reign over us." Within a week, the chief priests in Jerusalem would answer Pilate, "We have no king except Caesar" (John 19:15). And forty years later, in A.D. 70, the city fell. The final judgment of those who reject Christ's rule will come when He returns as King.

Between the Going and the Coming

We live in the time between the nobleman's going and his coming back. Our King has gone to receive His kingdom, and He has said to us, "Do business until I come." The question for every one of us is not when He is coming. It is what He will find us doing with what He gave us when He does.

Study Questions

1. Why did Peter's question in Matthew 19:27 need the answer Jesus gave in the parable of the workers?
2. Have you ever felt like the all-day workers, resenting God's goodness to someone else? What does "Is your eye evil because I am good?" say to you?
3. Why is the parable of the workers good news for someone who comes to Christ late in life?
4. Read the box on Archelaus. How would knowing that history change the way Jesus' listeners heard the parable of the minas?
5. The fearful servant said his master was "a harsh man." How does a wrong picture of God keep people from serving Him?
6. What has God given you to "do business" with until He comes? What are you doing with it?

Part Four: The Last Week, the Gospel of John, and You

Chapter 19: Parables in the Temple Courts

> *Jesus says to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures, '**The** stone which those building rejected, this has become **the** head of **the** corner; this was from **the** Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"*
>
> Matthew 21:42 (SLB)

On Sunday Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, and the crowds spread their cloaks on the road and shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" (Matthew 21:9). On Monday He drove the money changers out of the temple. On Tuesday, when He came back into the temple courts to teach, the chief priests and elders were waiting for Him with a question. "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?" (Matthew 21:23).

Jesus answered with a question about John the Baptist, and they would not answer it. Then He told them three parables, one after the other. Each one was aimed straight at the men standing in front of Him. These are the last parables Jesus told in public, and they are the sharpest.

54. The Two Sons

Where to read it: Matthew 21:28-32
Who heard it: The chief priests and elders of the people, in the temple courts
What prompted it: They had demanded to know by what authority Jesus acted, and refused to say whether John's baptism was from heaven

> *But what do you think? A man had two children, and having come to the first, he said, 'Child, go, work today in my vineyard.' And answering, he said, 'I do not want to'; but afterward, having regretted **it**, he went. And having come to the second, he said likewise. And answering, he said, 'I **will**, sir,' and he did not go.* (Matthew 21:28-30)

Then Jesus asked them for a verdict, just as Nathan once did with David.

> *Which of the two did the will of the father?" They say to Him, "The first." Jesus says to them, "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going before you into the kingdom of God. For John came to you in **the** way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and you, having seen **it**, did not regret **it** afterward so as to believe him.* (Matthew 21:31-32)

They had answered correctly, and in doing so, they had judged themselves. The son who said no and then went was the tax collectors and prostitutes. Their lives had been a loud no to God. But when John the Baptist came preaching repentance, they repented. The son who said, "I ***will***, sir," and never went was the religious leaders. They said all the right things. They were polite to God. But when God sent John, they did not believe him, and even after they saw sinners changed, they still would not repent.

What it means: God is not looking for people who say the right words. He is looking for people who do His will. It is better to start with a no and end with a yes than to start with a yes and never move. And it is

never too late to change your mind. The first son "regretted ***it***" and went. That is what repentance is. There is hope for the person who has said no to God all his life.

55. The Wicked Tenants

Where to read it: Matthew 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19
Who heard it: The chief priests, scribes, elders, and Pharisees, with the people listening
What prompted it: Same occasion; told right after the two sons

"Hear another parable," Jesus said (Matthew 21:33). And everyone listening would have recognized the opening.

> *Hear another parable. There was a certain man, a master of a house, who planted a vineyard, and placed a fence around it, and dug a winepress in it, and built a tower, and rented it out to farmers, and went abroad.* (Matthew 21:33)

These are almost the same words Isaiah used in his song of the vineyard, which we looked at in Chapter 1 (Isaiah 5:1-7). Every Jew who knew the Scriptures knew how that song ended: "For the vineyard of the LORD of armies ***is*** the house of Israel" (Isaiah 5:7). In Isaiah, the problem was that the vineyard produced bad grapes. In Jesus' story, the vineyard is fine. The problem is the tenants who are supposed to be taking care of it.

Behind the Story: Absentee landowners (*Background*)
In Galilee and Judea in Jesus' day, a good deal of the best farmland belonged to wealthy owners who lived far away, sometimes in other countries. They rented the land to tenant farmers, who paid the rent with a share of the crop at harvest time. Tension between owners and tenants was common, and stories of tenants who refused to pay are known from the ancient world. Under some customs of the time, land that went unclaimed by its owner for a long period might pass to the people who worked it, which may explain why the tenants thought killing the heir would let them keep the vineyard.

When harvest came, the owner sent servants to collect his share of the fruit. The tenants beat one, killed another, and stoned another. He sent more, and they did the same.

> *Having yet therefore one son, his beloved, he sent him also to them last, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those farmers said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' And having taken him, they killed* ***him*** *and cast* ***him*** *out of the vineyard.* (Mark 12:6-8)

Mark adds a detail that makes the story almost too painful to read. The owner had "one son, his beloved," and sent him last. That is the same word God the Father used at Jesus' baptism: "You are My Son, the beloved" (Mark 1:11). Jesus told this story knowing that within three days, the men listening to Him would do exactly what the tenants did.

Then He asked them what the owner would do. And once again, they gave the verdict.

> *They say to Him, "Wretches! He will wretchedly destroy them, and he will rent out the vineyard to other farmers who will give him the fruits in their seasons."* (Matthew 21:41)

Jesus answered them with Scripture.

> *Jesus says to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures, '**The** stone which those building rejected, this has become **the** head of **the** corner; this was from **the** Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? Because of this I say to you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and will be given to a nation producing its fruits. And the **one** having fallen on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder."* (Matthew 21:42-44)

The verse He quoted is Psalm 118:22-23, from the same psalm the crowds had sung when He rode into the city two days earlier, "Blessed ***is*** the ***One*** coming in ***the*** name of ***the*** Lord!" (Matthew 21:9; Psalm 118:26). The builders, the leaders of Israel, would reject the stone. But God would make it the cornerstone, the most important stone in the building. That stone is Jesus. Peter would quote this same verse to the same council after the resurrection (Acts 4:11).

> *And the chief priests and the Pharisees, having heard His parables, knew that He is speaking about them. And seeking to lay hold of Him, they feared the crowds, since they were holding Him as a prophet.* (Matthew 21:45-46)

What it means: This parable is a short history of Israel. God planted His vineyard and gave it every advantage. He sent prophet after prophet to call His people back to Him, and they were rejected, beaten, and killed. Jesus listed some of them later that same day (Matthew 23:29-37). Finally God sent His own beloved Son. And the leaders killed Him.

It is also a claim. Jesus does not put Himself among the servants, the prophets. He is the Son. He is different in kind from every messenger who came before Him. The writer of Hebrews says the same: "God, having spoken long ago to the fathers in the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us in a Son" (Hebrews 1:1-2).

And it is a warning. "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and will be given to a nation producing its fruits." In the generation that followed, the gospel went out to the Gentiles, and the temple where Jesus told this parable was destroyed in A.D. 70. But this does not mean God has rejected the Jewish people forever. Paul is clear that "God did not reject His people whom He foreknew" (Romans 11:2), and that a day is coming when "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26). The judgment in this parable fell on the leaders who rejected the Son and on that generation. The promise to Israel still stands.

56. The Wedding Feast of the King's Son

Where to read it: Matthew 22:1-14
Who heard it: The chief priests and Pharisees, with the people listening
What prompted it: Same occasion; the third parable in a row

"And Jesus, answering, spoke to them again in parables" (Matthew 22:1). This parable is something like the great banquet in Luke 14, which we looked at in Chapter 14. But it is a different story told on a different day, with a sharper edge.

> *The kingdom of the heavens has been likened to a man, a king, who made a wedding feast for his son. And he sent his slaves to call those having been called to the wedding feast, and they*

> *were not willing to come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Say to those having been called, "Look, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and the fattened **animals are** slaughtered, and all things **are** ready; come to the wedding feast."' But they, having paid no attention, went away, the one to his own field, the other to his business; and the rest, having seized his slaves, mistreated and killed **them**. And the king, having heard **it**, was angry; and having sent his armies, he destroyed those murderers and burned their city.* (Matthew 22:2-7)

This time the host is not just a wealthy man. He is a king, and the feast is the wedding of his son. To refuse a king's invitation to his son's wedding was not just rude. It was rebellion. And some of the invited guests did not just make excuses. They seized the king's servants, mistreated them, and killed them. So the king sent his armies and burned their city.

Many readers see in that burned city a picture of what happened to Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Jesus did not explain the details, but the parallel with the wicked tenants just before is hard to miss.

> *Then he says to his slaves, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those having been called were not worthy. Therefore go to the outlets of the roads, and as many as you find, call to the wedding feast.' And those slaves, having gone out into the roads, gathered together all, as many as they found, both evil and good; and the wedding feast was filled with those reclining.* (Matthew 22:8-10)

Notice the words "both evil and good." The invitation now goes out to everyone, with no regard for their past. The hall is filled. Then the king comes in to see his guests.

> *And the king, having come in to look at those reclining, saw there a man not dressed **in** a wedding garment, and he says to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here not having a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, 'Having bound his feet and hands, take him away and cast him out into the outer darkness; there will be the weeping and the gnashing of the teeth.'* (Matthew 22:11-13)

Behind the Story: The wedding garment (*Disputed*)

Many Bible teachers have said that in Jesus' day a king giving a feast would provide wedding garments for his guests, so that the man without one had refused a gift. That would make the meaning very clear: the garment is the righteousness God gives, and the man refused it. But I have not found clear ancient evidence that kings in Jesus' world regularly handed out garments to wedding guests, and many scholars doubt it. There are Old Testament examples of a king providing robes, such as Jehu's order to "bring out clothing for all who serve the Baal" (2 Kings 10:22), and Joseph giving his brothers changes of clothes (Genesis 45:22). But those do not prove a general custom. What the parable itself makes clear is enough: the man had no excuse, because when the king asked him, "he was speechless."

What it means: There are two warnings in this parable. The first is for those who refuse God's invitation outright, like the religious leaders who were rejecting God's Son that very week. The second is for those who come in on their own terms. The man without a wedding garment accepted the invitation and showed up at the feast, but he did not honor the king. He came as he was and meant to stay as he was.

The Bible often pictures salvation as being clothed by God. "He has clothed me ***with*** garments of salvation; He has covered me ***with*** a robe of righteousness" (Isaiah 61:10). In Revelation, the bride of the

Lamb is given fine linen to wear, “for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints” (Revelation 19:8). The garment we need is the righteousness of Christ, given to us when we believe, and it always produces a changed life. No one gets into God’s kingdom in the rags of his own righteousness. Everyone is invited. But everyone must come God’s way.

“For many are called, but few chosen” (Matthew 22:14). The invitation goes out to all. Not all who hear it truly respond.

Three Parables, One Message

Look at these three parables together and you will see that they march forward like three hammer blows.

Parable	What the leaders did	What happens to them
The two sons	Said yes to God and did not obey; rejected John	Tax collectors and prostitutes go into the kingdom ahead of them
The wicked tenants	Rejected the prophets and killed the Son	The kingdom is taken from them and given to others
The wedding feast	Refused the King’s invitation and killed His messengers	Their city is burned, and others fill the feast

The leaders understood every word. And instead of repenting, they went out and plotted to trap Him in His words (Matthew 22:15). Within three days they had Him on a cross. But the Stone they rejected became the head of the corner. “From the LORD this has come; it ***is*** wonderful in our eyes” (Psalm 118:23).

Study Questions

1. In the parable of the two sons, which son are you more like? What is God asking you to do that you have said yes to but not yet done?
2. Read Isaiah 5:1-7 and Matthew 21:33-41 side by side. What is the same, and what is different?
3. Why is it important that the owner’s last messenger was his son, not another servant?
4. Read Romans 11:1-2 and 11:25-27. How do these verses help us read the warning in Matthew 21:43 correctly?
5. What does the wedding garment teach about coming to God on His terms instead of ours?
6. The leaders understood the parables and still refused to repent. Why do you think understanding is not enough?

Chapter 20: Parables of His Return

> *Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.*
>
> Matthew 25:13 (SLB)

On Tuesday evening of that last week, Jesus left the temple for the last time. As they walked out, the disciples pointed out how beautiful its buildings were, and Jesus told them that not one stone would be left on another (Matthew 24:1-2). Then He sat down on the Mount of Olives, across the valley from the temple, and the disciples came to Him privately.

> *And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what **is** the sign of Your coming and of the consummation of the age?"* (Matthew 24:3)

Jesus' answer is called the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21). In it He described a time of great trouble coming on the earth, false christs, wars, persecution, and finally His own return in power and glory. And He ended with a string of parables about being ready.

How I Read the Olivet Discourse

Before we look at these parables, I want to be open with you about how I read this part of the Bible, because it affects what I say.

I hold the pre-tribulation view. I believe the next great event in God's plan is the Rapture, when Christ comes for His church and catches up believers, living and dead, to meet Him in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). After that, the world will go through the seven years of Tribulation that Daniel and Revelation describe, a time Jesus Himself called "great tribulation, such as has not happened from ***the*** beginning of ***the*** world until now" (Matthew 24:21). At the end of it, Christ will return to the earth with His saints, defeat His enemies, judge the nations, and set up His kingdom. The church is promised that Jesus "is delivering us from the wrath that is coming" (1 Thessalonians 1:10), and the risen Lord told a faithful church, "I also will keep you from the hour of testing which is about to come upon the whole inhabited world" (Revelation 3:10).

Many pre-tribulation teachers read Matthew 24 and 25 as speaking mainly about the Tribulation and Christ's coming to the earth at the end of it, "immediately after the tribulation of those days" (Matthew 24:29), with the people of Israel and those who come to faith during that time especially in view. On that reading, the parables in this chapter speak first to people who will be living on earth in those days. Other teachers apply them directly to the church waiting for the Rapture. Bible-believing Christians who hold other views on the timing read them differently again.

Here is what I believe we can all agree on. Whatever the exact timing, these parables teach truths that apply to every follower of Jesus in every age: be ready, be faithful, use what He has given you, and care for

His people. Those are the lessons I will draw out. For a fuller treatment of the end times, see my Daniel and Revelation Bible studies.

57. The Fig Tree Putting Out Leaves

Where to read it: Matthew 24:32-35; Mark 13:28-31; Luke 21:29-33
Who heard it: Peter, James, John, Andrew, and the other disciples, on the Mount of Olives
What prompted it: The disciples asked for the sign of His coming and of the end of the age

> *Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth the leaves, you know that the summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near, at the doors.* (Matthew 24:32-33)

Most trees in Israel keep their leaves all year. The fig tree is one of the few that loses them in winter. So when its bare branches turn soft and green and the first leaves come out, everyone knows summer is close. Luke's version says, "See the fig tree and all the trees" (Luke 21:29).

Jesus had just described the signs: the "abomination of desolation" in the holy place (Matthew 24:15), a time of great tribulation, false christs, and signs in the sun, moon, and stars (Matthew 24:29). When the people living in those days see "all these things," they can know that His coming is near, "at ***the*** doors."

> *Truly I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away until all these things happen. The heaven and the earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.*
> (Matthew 24:34-35)

The word "generation" has been argued over for centuries. Some take it to mean the people alive when Jesus spoke, and see its fulfillment in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Many pre-tribulation teachers take it to mean the generation that sees "all these things" begin, the people living in the Tribulation, who will see the whole of it completed. Others think it means the Jewish people as a race, who will not pass away before the end. I lean toward the second view, since Jesus is speaking of the generation that will see these signs. But the next words are what matter most: "My words will by no means pass away."

What it means: God gives signs for those who will need them. But Jesus immediately adds that no one knows the exact day or hour, "not even the angels of the heavens, except My Father alone" (Matthew 24:36). Signs are given to help us watch, not to help us set dates. Anyone who claims to know the date of Christ's return is claiming to know more than the angels.

58. The Ten Virgins

Where to read it: Matthew 25:1-13
Who heard it: The disciples, on the Mount of Olives
What prompted it: Continuing the teaching on His return

> *Then the kingdom of the heavens will be likened to ten virgins, who, having taken their lamps, went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and the other five were foolish. Those who were foolish, having taken their lamps, did not take oil with themselves; but the wise*

took oil in their vessels with their lamps. Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all became drowsy and were sleeping. (Matthew 25:1-5)

Behind the Story: A wedding in Jesus' day (*Background*)

A Jewish wedding in Jesus' time was a long celebration. After a betrothal, which was as binding as marriage, the groom would prepare a place for his bride, often at his father's house. On the wedding day, he and his friends would go in procession, often in the evening, to the bride's home to bring her back. Young women, friends of the bride, would wait with lamps to join the procession and escort the couple to the feast, which could last for days. The groom's arrival time was not fixed, and delays were common. The lamps may have been small clay oil lamps or torches made of rags soaked in oil on the end of a stick. Either way, they burned out quickly without extra oil.

All ten virgins looked the same. All had lamps. All were waiting. All fell asleep. The difference between them did not show until the moment the bridegroom came.

*And in the middle of **the** night there was a cry: 'Look, the bridegroom is coming! Go out to meet him!' Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us **some** of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'No, lest there not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.' And while they were going away to buy, the bridegroom came, and those **who were** ready went in with him to the wedding feast, and the door was shut.* (Matthew 25:6-10)

Why didn't the wise share? Because oil was not something that could be split in half at the last minute without leaving all of them in the dark. And there is a deeper reason, which the parable is pointing to. Some things cannot be borrowed. You cannot live on someone else's faith. A godly mother, a faithful church, a believing husband cannot be ready for you.

And afterward the remaining virgins also come, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us!' But he, answering, said, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming. (Matthew 25:11-13)

Those words, "I do not know you," are the same words Jesus used for the people outside the shut door in Luke 13:25-27, and for those who called Him "Lord, Lord" without doing His will in Matthew 7:21-23. They are the saddest words in the Gospels.

What it means: The foolish virgins were not wicked. They were careless. They planned for the bridegroom to come on their schedule, and he did not. They had the outward signs of readiness, the lamp and the waiting, but not the oil. Many teachers see the oil as a picture of genuine spiritual life, the presence of the Holy Spirit, who is often pictured by oil in the Bible. Whether or not we press the detail that far, the point is clear. Being near the wedding party is not the same as being ready for the bridegroom. There will come a moment when it is too late to get ready, and the door will be shut.

59. The Talents

Where to read it: Matthew 25:14-30
Who heard it: The disciples, on the Mount of Olives
What prompted it: Continuing the teaching on His return

This parable is like the parable of the minas in Luke 19, which we looked at in Chapter 18, but it was told on a different day to a different audience, and the details differ.

> *For **it is** just as a man going on a journey called his own slaves and handed over to them his possessions. And to one he gave approximately 375 pounds (five talents), and to another approximately 150 pounds (two **talents**), and to another approximately 75 pounds (one **talent**), to each according to his own ability; and he went on the journey immediately.* (Matthew 25:14-15)

In the minas, each servant received the same amount. Here, each one received a different amount, "to each according to his own ability." The SLB gives the weights in its notes: about 375 pounds of silver, 150, and 75. Even the smallest amount, one talent, was worth about twenty years' wages for a working man. Our English word "talent," meaning a natural gift, actually comes from this parable.

The first two servants went to work immediately and doubled what they had been given. The third dug a hole and buried his master's money. Burying money was considered a safe way to protect it in that world. He thought he was being careful.

After a long time, the master came back. Notice "after a long time" (Matthew 25:19). Like the bridegroom in the ten virgins, the master took longer than anyone expected.

> *And the one who had received the five talents, having come, brought another five talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over five talents to me; look, I have gained another five talents in addition to them.' And his master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave! You were faithful over a few things; I will set you over many things. Enter into the joy of your master.' And the one who had received the two talents also, having come, said, 'Master, you handed over two talents to me; look, I have gained another two talents in addition to them.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave! You were faithful over a few things; I will set you over many things. Enter into the joy of your master.'* (Matthew 25:20-23)

The two faithful servants received exactly the same praise, word for word, even though one had made five talents and the other two. The master was not measuring the size of their results. He was measuring their faithfulness with what they had been given.

Then came the third servant.

> *And the one who had received the one talent also, having come, said, 'Master, I knew you, that you are a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering from where you did not scatter. And having been afraid, having gone away, I hid your talent in the ground. Look, you have what **is** yours.' And his master, answering, said to him, 'Wicked and lazy slave! You knew that I reap where I did not sow, and gather from where I did not scatter? Therefore you ought to have put my money with the bankers, and having come, I would have received what **is** mine with interest.* (Matthew 25:24-27)

He had the wrong picture of his master. He thought he was harsh and greedy, and so he was afraid. And his fear made him do nothing. The master called him "wicked and lazy." He was not punished for losing money. He was punished for not using it at all.

What it means: Every one of us has been given something by our Master: time, abilities, money, opportunities, spiritual gifts, and the gospel itself. We are not all given the same amount, and we will not be judged by the same measure. What we will be judged on is faithfulness. The person with one talent who uses it well will hear exactly the same "Well done" as the person with five. What God does not accept is burying what He has given, out of fear, laziness, or a wrong view of who He is.

60. The Sheep and the Goats

Where to read it: Matthew 25:31-46
Who heard it: The disciples, on the Mount of Olives
What prompted it: The close of the Olivet Discourse

The last of the Olivet parables is not quite a parable in the usual sense. Most of it is a direct description of judgment. But it rests on a parable, the picture of a shepherd separating his flock.

> *Now when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on **the** throne of His glory. And all the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them from one another, just as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right, but the goats on **the** left.* (Matthew 25:31-33)

Behind the Story: Sheep and goats (*Background*)

In Israel, shepherds often grazed sheep and goats together during the day in a mixed flock. At night, many separated them, because goats needed more warmth and shelter than sheep in the cold. From a distance, the animals could look alike, especially breeds of sheep with dark wool. But the shepherd knew which was which. The right hand was the place of honor and favor.

The King says to those on His right, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from ***the*** foundation of ***the*** world" (Matthew 25:34). And He tells them why: I was hungry and you fed Me, thirsty and you gave Me drink, a stranger and you took Me in, naked and you clothed Me, sick and you visited Me, in prison and you came to Me.

They are astonished. When did we ever do that for You?

> *And the King, answering, will say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did **it** to one of these My brothers, the least **ones**, you did **it** to Me.'* (Matthew 25:40)

Those on His left are told to depart into the eternal fire, because they did none of these things. They are just as astonished. When did we ever see You in need? And the King says that when they failed to help "one of the least of these," they failed to help Him.

> *And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.* (Matthew 25:46)

Who Are “My Brothers”?

Who are “these My brothers, the least ***ones***”? This question matters, and good Bible teachers answer it differently.

Many take it to mean anyone in need, so that every act of kindness to a hungry or suffering person is done to Jesus. Others take it to mean Christians in need, since Jesus elsewhere calls His disciples His brothers (Matthew 12:49-50; 28:10). Many pre-tribulation teachers, reading the passage as the judgment of the nations when Christ returns to the earth at the end of the Tribulation, see “My brothers” as the Jewish people, and the believers among them, who will be hunted and persecuted in those days. On that reading, the nations and people who sheltered and helped them at great risk will show by their actions that they have come to believe.

I believe the most natural reading is that “My brothers” are Jesus’ own people, His disciples, with special attention to those who suffer for His name. But on any reading, the lesson for us is the same, and it is not a small one. The way we treat the least of Jesus’ brothers is the way we treat Jesus.

What it means: This passage does not teach that we are saved by good works. The sheep are surprised by their reward. They were not trying to earn anything. Their care for Jesus’ brothers came naturally out of hearts that already belonged to Him. And the inheritance they receive was “prepared for you from ***the*** foundation of ***the*** world,” which means it was a gift planned long before they did anything. As James wrote, “the faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself” (James 2:17). The goats, on the other hand, were not condemned for some terrible crime. They were condemned for neglect. They never saw Him in the hungry, the stranger, and the prisoner, because they never truly knew Him.

Four Pictures of Readiness

Parable	What readiness looks like	The warning
The fig tree	Watching the signs God gives	No one knows the day or hour
The ten virgins	Having real oil, not just a lamp	The door will be shut
The talents	Using what the Master gave	Burying it out of fear
The sheep and the goats	Caring for His brothers	Neglect reveals a heart that never knew Him

Jesus did not give these parables to satisfy our curiosity about the future. He gave them to change the way we live now.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus said that not even the angels know the day or hour of His return? How should that shape the way we talk about end times?
2. In the parable of the ten virgins, all ten fell asleep. What was the real difference between the wise and the foolish?
3. Why can’t spiritual readiness be borrowed from someone else?

4. The servant with two talents received the same praise as the one with five. What does that tell you about how God measures faithfulness?

5. What “talents” has God given you? Are any of them buried?

6. Read Matthew 25:35-36. Who are the hungry, the strangers, and the prisoners among Jesus’ people that you could serve this month?

Chapter 21: The Word Pictures in John

> *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.*
>
> John 10:11 (SLB)

The first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are full of story parables. John's Gospel has almost none. Instead, John records long conversations and speeches in which Jesus uses great word pictures to show who He is. "I am the bread of life." "I am the light of the world." "I am the good shepherd." "I am the true vine."

As we saw in Chapter 1, John uses a different word for these, *paroimia*, a figure of speech (John 10:6; 16:25). But they do the same work as the parables in the other Gospels. They take something from ordinary life and lay it beside a truth about God. The difference is that in John, Jesus is almost always at the center of the picture. John's word pictures do not just describe the kingdom. They describe the King.

This chapter looks at six of them. I have not numbered every one of the great I AM sayings, such as "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35) or "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), because those are direct statements more than pictures that are drawn out. But the six below are worked out at some length, and they belong in any full account of how Jesus taught.

61. Fields White for Harvest

Where to read it: John 4:31-38
Who heard it: The disciples, at a well in Samaria
What prompted it: The disciples came back with food and found Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman, and she had gone to tell her town about Him

This one comes from early in Jesus' ministry. He had stopped at Jacob's well near the Samaritan town of Sychar while His disciples went to buy food. When they came back, they found Him talking with a Samaritan woman, which surprised them. She left her water jar and ran into town saying, "Come, see a man who told me all things that I did. This is not the Christ, ***is it***?" (John 4:29). The disciples urged Jesus to eat. He told them He had food they did not know about: to do the will of the One who sent Him (John 4:31-34). Then He pointed at the fields.

> *Do you not say, 'It is yet four months, and the harvest comes'? Look, I say to you, lift up your eyes and see the fields, that they are white for harvest already. And the one who reaps receives a reward and gathers fruit into eternal life, so that both the one who sows and the one who reaps may rejoice together.* (John 4:35-36)

It was probably winter or early spring, and the grain had only recently been sown. The harvest was four months away. But Jesus may have been pointing at something else. Out from the town, across those green fields, came a crowd of Samaritans in their light-colored robes, walking toward Him because of what the woman told them. Many of them believed (John 4:39-42). That was the harvest that was white and ready.

What it means: We are always tempted to say that the harvest is later. When the kids are older. When things settle down. When people are more open. Jesus says to lift up your eyes. People are ready now, often people we would never expect, like a Samaritan woman with a messy past. And Jesus adds that we often reap where others have sown: "others have toiled, and you have entered into their labor" (John 4:38). The sower and the reaper rejoice together.

62. The Door of the Sheepfold

Where to read it: John 10:1-10
Who heard it: Pharisees, after Jesus healed a man born blind
What prompted it: The Pharisees had thrown the healed man out of the synagogue and claimed that they could see

In John 9, Jesus healed a man who had been blind from birth. The Pharisees questioned the man, insulted him, and threw him out. Jesus found him, and the man believed and worshiped Him. Then Jesus said that He had come so that the blind would see and those who claim to see would become blind. Some Pharisees nearby asked, "We are not also blind, are we?" (John 9:40). Jesus answered with a figure of speech about sheep.

> *"Truly, truly, I say to you, the **one** not entering through the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbing up from elsewhere, that **one** is a thief and a robber. But the **one** entering through the door is **the** shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, because they know his voice. But a stranger they will certainly not follow, but they will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers."* (John 10:1-5)

Behind the Story: The sheepfold (*Background*)

A sheepfold in Israel was often a simple stone-walled pen, sometimes shared by several flocks in a village, with a single opening. At night a doorkeeper, or one of the shepherds, guarded the gate. In the morning each shepherd would come and call his own sheep, and they would separate from the other flocks and follow him, because they knew his voice. Travelers in the Middle East long after Bible times described seeing exactly this. In open country, a shepherd might gather his sheep into a rough stone enclosure or a cave and then lie down across the opening himself, so that nothing could get in or out without going past him. In a very real sense, he became the door.

John tells us the Pharisees did not understand (John 10:6). So Jesus explained.

> *Therefore Jesus said to them again, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All, as many as came before Me, are thieves and robbers; but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door. If anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and he will go in and will go out and will find pasture. The thief does not come except that he may steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and may have **it** abundantly."* (John 10:7-10)

What it means: Jesus is the only way into the safety and life of God's flock. "I am the door. If anyone enters through Me, he will be saved." He did not say He is one door among many. And the life He gives is not a narrow, fearful life. His sheep "will go in and will go out and will find pasture." The thief, whether a

false teacher, a false religion, or the devil himself, comes only to "steal and kill and destroy." Jesus came to give life, and abundantly. The man born blind, thrown out of the synagogue, was not shut out of God's flock. He had just come in through the door.

63. The Good Shepherd

Where to read it: John 10:11-18
Who heard it: Pharisees and others in Jerusalem
What prompted it: Same occasion

Then Jesus changed the picture slightly. He is not only the door. He is the shepherd.

> *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. But the hired man, and not being a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters the sheep. Now the hired man flees because he is a hired man and is not concerned about the sheep.* (John 10:11-13)

Behind these words stands Ezekiel 34. There God condemned the shepherds of Israel, the leaders, for feeding themselves instead of the flock, and promised, "Look, I, I Myself, will search for My flock and seek them out" (Ezekiel 34:11), and that He would set over them one shepherd, His servant David (Ezekiel 34:23). The Pharisees had just thrown a sheep out of the fold. Jesus is the Shepherd God promised.

> *I am the good shepherd; and I know My own, and I am known by My own, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And I have other sheep which are not of this fold; those also I must bring, and they will hear My voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd.* (John 10:14-16)

"Other sheep which are not of this fold." Those are the Gentiles. One day Jew and Gentile would be brought together in one flock under one Shepherd.

Jesus then said something no shepherd in Israel could say. "I lay down My life, so that I may take it again. No one takes it away from Me, but I lay it down from Myself" (John 10:17-18). The good shepherd does not just risk his life. He gives it, on purpose, and takes it back again.

What it means: We are sheep, and sheep are not known for their wisdom or strength. We wander, we panic, and we cannot defend ourselves. What we need most is a good shepherd. Jesus knows His sheep by name. He leads them. He protects them. And He laid down His life for them. Psalm 23 begins, "The LORD ***is*** my shepherd; I will not lack." Jesus was saying that He is that Shepherd.

64. The Grain of Wheat

Where to read it: John 12:20-26
Who heard it: Philip and Andrew, with some Greeks who wanted to see Jesus
What prompted it: Some Greeks who had come up to worship at the feast asked to see Jesus, a few days before the cross

In the last week, some Greeks came to Philip and said, "Sir, we want to see Jesus" (John 12:21). They were Gentiles who worshiped Israel's God. When Philip and Andrew told Jesus, He answered in a way that must have seemed strange.

> *And Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come that the Son of Man may be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless the grain of wheat, having fallen into the ground, dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."* (John 12:23-24)

A grain of wheat on its own stays a single grain. You can keep it safe in a jar for years, and it will never be more than one grain. But bury it in the ground, where it seems to die, and it sprouts and grows and produces a head of grain with many seeds in it.

Jesus was talking about His own death. The Greeks wanted to see Jesus. The way the nations would truly see Him, and come to Him, was through the cross. "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all ***men*** to Myself" (John 12:32).

Then He applied it to His followers.

> *The **one** loving his life will lose it, and the **one** hating his life in this world will keep it to eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant also will be. And if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.* (John 12:25-26)

What it means: Life comes through death. That is true of Jesus, whose death brought life to millions. And it is true of us. The person who clings to his own life, his comfort, his plans, his safety, will lose it in the end. The person who lets go, who gives his life away for Jesus, will find it. Every missionary who left home, every believer who gave up a career or a comfort for Christ, has found this to be true.

65. The Woman in Labor

Where to read it: John 16:16-24
Who heard it: The disciples, on the night before the crucifixion
What prompted it: Jesus told them, "A little ***while***, and you do not see Me; and again a little ***while***, and you will see Me" (John 16:16), and they did not understand

On the night before the cross, Jesus told His disciples that in a little while they would not see Him, and then in a little while they would see Him again. They were confused and whispering among themselves about what He meant. So He gave them a picture every one of them had seen in his own family.

> *Truly, truly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be grieved, but your grief will become joy. The woman, when she is giving birth, has grief, because her hour has come; but when she has brought forth the child, she no longer remembers the tribulation, because of the joy that a man has been born into the world. And you therefore*

now indeed have grief; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one takes your joy from you. (John 16:20-22)

What it means: The disciples were about to go through the worst days of their lives. Their Master would be arrested, beaten, and killed, while the world celebrated. But that grief would turn into joy, the way the pain of labor turns into joy when a baby is born. The pain is real. It is not imaginary. But it is not the end, and it brings something new into the world. Three days later, they saw Him alive, and no one has been able to take that joy away from His people since. Paul uses the same picture for all of creation, which is groaning as in labor, waiting for the day of redemption (Romans 8:22-23). For every believer, the grief of this age will give way to joy when we see Him.

66. The Vine and the Branches

Where to read it: John 15:1-8
Who heard it: The disciples, on the night before the crucifixion
What prompted it: Teaching on the way from the upper room toward the Garden of Gethsemane

Late that same night, after supper, Jesus said, "Rise, let us go from here" (John 14:31). They may have walked past the vineyards outside the city, or through the temple courts, where a great golden vine decorated the entrance of the temple. As they walked, Jesus gave them one last great word picture.

Behind the Story: The vine in Israel (*Text confirmed*)
The grapevine was one of the main crops of Israel and a familiar picture of the nation itself. Psalm 80:8 says God brought a vine out of Egypt and planted it, and Isaiah's song of the vineyard calls Israel God's vineyard (Isaiah 5:7). Josephus says the gate of the temple's holy house "had also golden vines above it, from which clusters of grapes hung as tall as a man's height" (The Jewish War 5.5.4, Whiston translation; see also Antiquities 15.11.3). A vinedresser pruned his vines hard each year, cutting away dead wood and trimming the living branches back so that they would put their strength into fruit rather than leaves. Wood from a grapevine is too soft and crooked to be useful for building. As Ezekiel 15 points out, the only thing a fruitless vine branch is good for is the fire.

*I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me not bearing fruit, He takes it away; and every **branch** bearing fruit, He prunes it, so that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Remain in Me, and I in you. Even as the branch is not able to bear fruit from itself unless it remains in the vine, so neither **can** you unless you remain in Me. I am the vine; you **are** the branches. The **one** remaining in Me and I in him, this **one** bears much fruit; for apart from Me you are not able to do anything.* (John 15:1-5)

Israel was often called God's vine, and too often it was a fruitless one. Now Jesus says, "I am the true vine." He is everything Israel was meant to be, and the only source of real fruit. His Father is the vinedresser, who cares for the vine and its branches.

Every branch in the vine is pruned. That hurts. Pruning means cutting. But the cutting is not punishment. It is care, "so that it may bear more fruit." God uses hard things in the lives of His children to cut away what is drawing off their strength and to make them more fruitful.

The word remain (older translations say abide) appears again and again in this passage. A branch does not produce fruit by trying harder. It produces fruit by staying connected to the vine, so that the vine's life flows through it. "Apart from Me you are not able to do anything."

> *Unless someone remains in Me, he is thrown out as the branch and is dried up; and they gather them and throw **them** into **the** fire, and they are burned. If you remain in Me, and My declarations remain in you, you will ask whatever you wish, and it will happen for you. In this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; and you will become My disciples.* (John 15:6-8)

What it means: The Christian life is not about effort. It is about connection. We bear fruit by staying close to Jesus: in His word, in prayer, in obedience, and in fellowship with His people. Branches that look attached but have no life in them, like Judas, who had left the room that very night, are eventually removed. But a branch that remains in Jesus will bear much fruit, and that fruit brings glory to the Father.

Who Jesus Is

Put John's word pictures together and you have a portrait of Jesus. He is the Lord of the harvest, who sees what others miss. He is the door, the only way in. He is the good shepherd, who knows His sheep and dies for them. He is the grain of wheat, who dies to bring life to many. He is the One whose death and resurrection turn grief into joy. And He is the true vine, the source of all real life and fruit.

The parables in Matthew, Mark, and Luke teach us about the kingdom. The pictures in John show us the King. You cannot have one without the other.

Study Questions

1. Jesus said, "Lift up your eyes and see the fields." Who in your life might be more ready to hear about Jesus than you think?
2. What does it mean to you that Jesus calls Himself the door? How does that answer the idea that there are many ways to God?
3. Read Psalm 23 and John 10:11-18 together. What does the Good Shepherd do for His sheep?
4. Jesus said that a grain of wheat must die to bear fruit. What might God be asking you to let go of so that He can bring life through you?
5. How has God used "pruning," hard and painful times, to make you more fruitful?
6. What does it look like, day to day, to "remain" in Jesus?

Chapter 22: What the Parables Show Us About God

> *And having risen up, he went to his own father. But while he was still far distant, his father saw him and was moved with compassion, and having run, he fell on his neck and kissed him.*
>
> Luke 15:20 (SLB)

We have now walked through every parable in the Gospels, from salt and light in the Sermon on the Mount to the vine and the branches on the last night before the cross. Before we close, I want to step back and look at the whole picture. What do all these stories, taken together, tell us about God? About Jesus? About His kingdom? This chapter gathers the threads.

God Is a Father Who Runs

The single most surprising thing the parables teach about God is how much He wants to be with us. In story after story, God is the one who moves first. The shepherd goes after the lost sheep. The woman lights a lamp and sweeps until she finds the coin. The father watches the road and runs to meet his son. The king sends his servants out again and again to call people to the feast, and when the first guests refuse, he sends them to the streets, the lanes, the roads, and the hedges, because he wants his house full.

That is not the picture of God most people carry around in their heads. Many people think of God as distant, cold, or hard to please, like the third servant who said, "I knew you, that you are a hard man" (Matthew 25:24). The parables say that picture is wrong. God is holy, and He will judge. But His heart is the heart of a father who throws a party when a sinner comes home.

God Is Generous Beyond Fairness

Again and again the parables show God giving far more than anyone deserves. The king forgives a debt of ten thousand talents. The landowner pays the eleventh-hour workers a full day's wage. The father puts the best robe on the son who wasted his inheritance. The creditor forgives both debtors, the one who owed five hundred and the one who owed fifty. The master ties on an apron and serves his own servants at the table.

And again and again, that generosity offends people who think they have earned something. The all-day workers grumble. The older brother refuses to go in. Simon the Pharisee judges the woman at Jesus' feet. The parables make us choose. Will we be glad that God is generous, or angry that He is not fair? Paul answered that question for himself: "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this ***is*** not from yourselves; the gift ***is*** of God" (Ephesians 2:8). If God were only fair, none of us would be in the feast.

God Is Patient, but Not Forever

The parables show God holding back judgment so that people have time to repent. The owner gives the fig tree one more year. The master lets the wheat and the weeds grow together until the harvest. The bridegroom delays, and the master of the talents is gone "a long time."

But the same parables say the patience will end. The fig tree will be cut down if it bears no fruit. The harvest will come. The door will be shut. The great chasm will be fixed. The nobleman will return and settle accounts. Jesus told these stories so that no one would mistake God's patience for indifference. As Isaiah said, "Seek the LORD while He lets Himself be found; call on Him while He is near" (Isaiah 55:6).

God Is the Judge

Jesus spoke of judgment in His parables often and plainly. The weeds are burned. The bad fish are thrown out. The man without a wedding garment is cast into the outer darkness. The unfaithful manager is assigned a place with the hypocrites. The rich man lifts his eyes in torment. The goats go away into eternal punishment.

We do not like to talk about these things, and I understand why. But Jesus, who loved people more than anyone who ever lived, talked about them more than anyone in the Bible. He did it because He loved people too much to let them go on unwarned. The parables teach that every person will one day give an account to God, and that what we do with Jesus in this life decides where we spend eternity.

Jesus Puts Himself in the Story

In Chapter 1, I said that what makes Jesus' parables different from the stories of other teachers is that He kept putting Himself in them. Now that we have looked at them all, we can see how true that is.

In the parable	Jesus is	Where
The bridegroom's friends	The Bridegroom	Mark 2:19-20
The strong man	The Stronger One who binds Satan	Luke 11:21-22
The sower; the wheat and the weeds	The Sower, the Son of Man	Matthew 13:37
The physician	The Physician for sinners	Mark 2:17
The king's sons	The Son, free from the temple tax	Matthew 17:25-26
The wicked tenants	The beloved Son, sent last and killed	Mark 12:6-8
The rejected stone	The head of the corner	Matthew 21:42
The wedding feast	The King's Son	Matthew 22:2
The minas; the talents	The Master who goes away and returns	Luke 19:12; Matthew 25:19
The ten virgins	The Bridegroom who comes at midnight	Matthew 25:6
The sheep and the goats	The King and Judge	Matthew 25:31-34
The door and the good shepherd	The Door and the Shepherd who dies for the sheep	John 10:9, 11
The grain of wheat	The Seed who dies and bears much fruit	John 12:24
The vine	The True Vine	John 15:1

No ordinary teacher talks like this. A rabbi who told parables about the kingdom would not put himself in them as the King's own Son, the Judge of all nations, and the only door into the fold. Either Jesus was badly confused about who He was, or He is exactly who He said He was. The parables do not leave us the option of calling Him just a good teacher.

The Kingdom Is Here, and the Kingdom Is Coming

The parables also teach us about God's kingdom, and they hold together two truths that can be hard to keep in balance.

The kingdom is already here. It came in Jesus. When He cast out demons, the kingdom of God had come upon them (Matthew 12:28). The seed is already in the ground. The leaven is already working. The treasure can be found today, and the feast is ready now.

And the kingdom is still coming. The harvest is at the end of the age. The nobleman is still away receiving his kingdom. The bridegroom has not yet come. The master of the talents will return "after a long time." The fig tree's leaves point to a day that is still ahead.

We live between the planting and the harvest, between the going away and the coming back. That is why so many parables are about faithfulness and readiness. God's kingdom started small, like a mustard seed, and it is growing quietly, like leaven. One day it will fill the earth, and the King will reign in full view of all.

People Are Responsible

Finally, the parables teach that every person must respond. Each soil receives the same seed. Each guest receives the same invitation. Each servant is given something to work with. And each one is accountable for what he does with it.

The parables never treat people like puppets. The younger son, "having come to himself," got up. The tax collector beat his breast. The first son "regretted ***it***" and went. The guests began to make excuses. The third servant "was afraid." The older brother "was not willing to go in." These are real choices, and they matter. God's grace goes first, always. But grace is a gift that must be received, and the parables call every one of us to receive it.

Study Questions

1. Which picture of God in the parables surprised you most as you worked through this book? Why?
2. Many people think of God as a "hard man," like the third servant did. Where do you think that idea comes from? How do the parables answer it?
3. Why do you think Jesus spoke so often about judgment in His parables?
4. Look at the table of the places where Jesus puts Himself in the parables. Which one means the most to you?
5. How do you hold together that the kingdom is already here and still coming? What difference does each truth make in your life?

Chapter 23: What the Parables Ask of Us

*But be doers of **the** word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*

James 1:22 (SLB)

Jesus ended His greatest sermon with the parable of the two builders. Both men heard His words. One did them, and one did not. When the storm came, that was the only difference that mattered. In the same way, it is possible to finish a book about the parables, know every one of them, and be no different. This chapter is about the difference. What are the parables asking of us?

Listen

The first thing the parables ask is that we listen. “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:9). “Therefore watch how you hear” (Luke 8:18).

Listening is harder than it sounds. The path, the rocky ground, and the thorns all heard the word. Only the good soil heard it in a way that produced fruit. Ask God to make you good soil. Come to His word expecting Him to speak. Do not read the Bible only to finish a reading plan or to win an argument. Read it to hear your Father’s voice. And when you do not understand something, do what the disciples did. Ask Him. Jesus explained “all things” privately to those who stayed and asked (Mark 4:34).

Repent and Come Home

The parables call sinners home. The younger son came to himself and got up. The tax collector beat his breast and prayed for mercy. The first son changed his mind and went to work in the vineyard. The guests from the roads and hedges came in to the feast.

If you have never done this, the next chapter is for you. But repentance is not only how the Christian life begins. It is how it goes on. Every time the Holy Spirit shows us something in a parable that looks like us, the older brother’s pride, the rich fool’s barns, the unforgiving servant’s grip on a fellow servant’s throat, He is calling us to turn and come home again.

Treasure the Kingdom Above Everything

The man in the field sold everything for the treasure. The merchant sold everything for the pearl. The tower builder and the king going to war count the cost. Jesus asks us to value Him and His kingdom above everything else we have, and to give it all up gladly when He asks.

That will look different for different people. For some it may mean a hard decision about a career or a relationship. For most of us it means a hundred small decisions every week about how we use our time, our money, and our attention. The question each time is simple: is He worth it? The parables answer yes.

Forgive and Show Mercy

The unforgiving servant and the good Samaritan stand side by side as two warnings and two invitations. The servant forgot what he had been forgiven. The Samaritan remembered that the man in the road was a human being. Both stories ask us to treat others the way God has treated us.

Is there someone you need to forgive "from your heart" (Matthew 18:35)? Is there someone lying wounded by your road whom you have been walking past? The parables do not let us keep our faith in a private box. They push it out onto the road to Jericho and into the marketplace where the hundred-denarii debtor is.

Be Humble

The places at the feast, the unworthy servants, and the Pharisee and the tax collector all teach the same lesson. "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14). We have nothing God owes us. Everything is grace. The lowest seat is the safest place to sit, and the Host knows exactly where we belong.

Pray and Do Not Give Up

The friend at midnight kept knocking. The widow kept coming. Jesus told these stories to teach us to pray always and not lose heart (Luke 18:1). If you are tired of praying about something, these parables are for you. God is not a sleepy neighbor or an unjust judge. He is a Father who hears, and He will answer.

Use What You Have Been Given

The minas and the talents ask us what we are doing with what the Master left in our hands. The shrewd manager asks whether we are using money with eternity in view. The rich fool asks whether we are rich toward God. The faithful manager asks whether we are feeding the people in our care.

The danger here is usually not open rebellion. It is the buried talent: the gift never used, the opportunity never taken, the money that could have done eternal good sitting in a barn. The servant with one talent was not condemned for losing it. He was condemned for burying it.

Be Ready

Finally, the parables call us to be ready for Jesus' return. Keep the lamp burning. Have oil in the flask. Do not say, "My master delays to come." Live today in a way you would be glad for Him to find.

I believe the Rapture could happen at any moment. But even if I am wrong about the timing, and even if He does not come in my lifetime, each of us will meet Him face to face. The only time we can be sure we have to get ready is now.

Teaching the Parables to Others

The householder in Matthew 13:52 brought treasures out of his storeroom to share. Once you have learned the parables, you have treasure to share too. Here are a few suggestions from my own experience.

With children. The parables were made for children. Act them out. Hide a coin in the room and let them search for it, then talk about how happy the woman was. Plant a mustard seed or a bean in a cup and watch it grow. Let them be the sheep and you be the shepherd. Ask simple questions: Who was kind? Who was sad? What does this tell us about God? Children will remember a story long after they forget a lesson.

With a small group. Read the parable out loud, slowly, before anyone says a word. Then ask the eight questions from Chapter 3: Did Jesus explain it? Who was listening? What prompted it? What would they have known? Where is the surprise? Who are the main characters? What does it ask us to do? How does it fit with the rest of the Bible? Let people find the point for themselves before you tell them. And always end by asking where each person sees himself in the story.

With a friend who does not believe. Many people who will not sit through a sermon will listen to a story. The prodigal son, the good Samaritan, and the Pharisee and the tax collector have opened countless conversations about God. Tell the story, then ask what they think it means. You may be surprised where the conversation goes.

With yourself. Pick one parable a week. Read it every morning. Ask God to show you something new each time. By the end of the week, it will be part of you.

The Storm Is Coming

Jesus ended the Sermon on the Mount with a storm, and I want to end this chapter there too. The rain will fall and the floods will come on every life. Some of those storms come in this life: sickness, loss, betrayal, failure. And one great storm is coming at the end, when every one of us stands before God.

The house that stands is the house built on the rock. And the rock is not just hearing the words of Jesus. It is doing them. Do not let this book be one more thing you heard. Take one thing the parables have shown you, and do it.

Study Questions

1. Of all the things the parables ask of us in this chapter, which one do you most need to work on right now?
2. Think of one parable that has spoken to you personally while reading this book. What is one concrete thing you will do because of it?
3. Is there a buried talent in your life? What would it take to dig it up and put it to work?
4. Choose one parable to teach to a child, a friend, or your small group this month. Which one will you choose, and why?
5. Read Matthew 7:24-27 one more time. What part of your life is still built on sand?

Chapter 24: Do You Have Ears to Hear?

> *Look, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.*
>
> Revelation 3:20 (SLB)

We started this book with a sower walking across a field, throwing seed onto four kinds of ground. I want to end it by asking you, as gently and honestly as I can, what kind of ground you are.

You may have grown up in church. You may know every parable in this book by heart. You may have taught them to others. Or you may have picked up this book out of curiosity, and some of these stories are new to you. Either way, the parables were not given to us as interesting literature. They were given as an invitation, and every invitation asks for an answer.

I first answered God's invitation as a boy in Victorville, when Pastor Jimmy Carter took me to church and led me to Christ. Even so, I drifted more than once and had to learn what it means to follow Him every day. Every time I came back, that invitation was still open. Hearing Jesus means responding while the door is open.

The Invitation

In the parable of the great banquet, the servant went out with a simple message: “Come, because all things are now ready” (Luke 14:17). That is still the message.

Everything needed for you to be right with God is ready. You do not have to earn it. You could not if you tried. The debt is ten thousand talents, and none of us can pay. But Jesus, the beloved Son who was sent last and killed outside the vineyard, paid it on the cross. He is the good shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep. He is the grain of wheat that fell into the ground and died so that it could bear much fruit. And He rose again on the third day, just as He said He would.

The Bible says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this ***is*** not from yourselves; the gift ***is*** of God, not from works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Salvation is the best robe, the ring, and the sandals, given to a son who came home with nothing but a confession.

Which Son Are You?

Maybe you are like the younger son. You have run as far from God as you could. You have wasted things you can never get back. You are in the far country, among the pigs, and you are hungry. Come to yourself. Get up and go home. Your Father is watching the road. He will run to meet you.

Maybe you are like the older brother. You have done everything right. You have served God for years and never broken His commandments, at least not the big ones. But your heart is cold, and you have been keeping score. You have been standing outside the feast, angry that God is so generous to people who do

not deserve it. Your Father has come out to plead with you too. Don't stay outside. The door is open, and the music is playing.

Maybe you are like the Pharisee in the temple, sure of your own goodness. Or like the rich fool, with full barns and no thought for your soul. Or like the guests who made excuses, not against God, just too busy. Or like the five foolish virgins, with a lamp but no oil, near the wedding but not ready for the bridegroom.

Every one of those people can still come home, as long as the door is open. But the door will not stay open forever.

How to Come

Coming to God is not complicated. The tax collector did it in seven words. Here is what it means.

Admit you are a sinner. Like the tax collector, stop comparing yourself with others and tell God the truth. "God, be propitious to me, the sinner!" (Luke 18:13).

Believe that Jesus died for you and rose again. He is the only door. "I am the door. If anyone enters through Me, he will be saved" (John 10:9).

Turn from your sin and trust Him. Like the younger son, get up and go to your Father. Repentance is not just being sorry. It is turning around.

Confess Him as Lord. "That if you confess with your mouth Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God raised Him out of ***the*** dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

If you want to come to Him now, you can pray something like this, in your own words. The words themselves are not magic. What matters is the heart behind them.

> *Father in heaven, I have sinned against You. I have gone my own way, and I do not deserve to be called Your child. Thank You for sending Jesus to die for my sins and for raising Him from the dead. Lord Jesus, I turn from my sin and I trust You alone to save me. I want You to be my Lord. Thank You for running to meet me and bringing me home. Help me to hear Your voice and follow You for the rest of my life. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If you prayed that prayer and meant it, the Bible says there is joy in heaven over you right now (Luke 15:10). Tell someone. Find a church that teaches the Bible. Begin reading the Gospels; Mark or John is a good place to start. And keep reading the parables. You will find that they mean even more now that you are in the story.

For Those Who Already Belong to Him

If you already know Jesus, this book has been a call to hear Him more clearly and follow Him more closely. Do not let it end here.

Keep sowing the seed, even when most of it seems to fall on hard ground. Keep the lamp burning. Keep praying and do not lose heart. Forgive from your heart. Be a neighbor to the wounded on your road. Use

the talents your Master has given you. Remain in the Vine. And watch for the Bridegroom, because He is coming.

One day very soon, the Master will come home. And to every faithful servant, whether he was given five talents or two or one, He will say the words every one of us longs to hear: “Well done, good and faithful slave! You were faithful over a few things; I will set you over many things. Enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21).

Until that day, He is still standing at the door and knocking.

> *Look, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.* (Revelation 3:20)

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Study Questions

1. As you look back over this book, which parable has spoken to you most clearly? What has it said?
2. Which character in the parables do you see yourself in most right now: the younger son, the older brother, the Pharisee, the tax collector, the faithful servant, or someone else?
3. Have you ever personally received God’s invitation and come to the feast? If not, what is keeping you back?
4. If you already belong to Jesus, who is one person you could invite to “come, because all things are now ready”?
5. What would it look like for you to live this week as a servant waiting for the Master to come home?

Appendix A: Master List of Parables

This list gathers every numbered parable in the book, in the order it appears. The fourth column names who heard it. The last column gives the chapter where you can read about it. Remember that the count reflects where I drew the line in Before You Begin. Other careful Bible teachers count the parables differently.

No.	Parable	Where to read it	Who heard it	Ch.
1	Salt of the Earth	Matthew 5:13; Mark 9:49-50; Luke 14:34-35	The disciples, with the crowds listening	4
2	The Light of the World and the Lamp on the Stand	Matthew 5:14-16; Mark 4:21-22; Luke 8:16-17; 11:33	The disciples, with the crowds listening; later the crowd by the sea	4
3	The Lamp of the Body	Matthew 6:22-23; Luke 11:34-36	The disciples, with the crowds listening	4
4	The Speck and the Log	Matthew 7:3-5; Luke 6:41-42	The disciples, with the crowds listening	4
5	The Blind Leading the Blind	Luke 6:39-40; Matthew 15:12-14	The disciples and the crowd; later the disciples, about the Pharisees	4
6	The Father's Good Gifts	Matthew 7:9-11; Luke 11:11-13	The disciples, with the crowds listening; in Luke, the disciples after they asked Him to teach them to pray	4
7	Trees and Their Fruit	Matthew 7:15-20; 12:33-35; Luke 6:43-45	The disciples and the crowds; later the Pharisees	4
8	The Wise and Foolish Builders	Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49	The disciples and the crowds	4
9	Settle With Your Opponent on the Way	Matthew 5:25-26; Luke 12:57-59	The disciples and the crowds; later a great crowd	4
10	The Physician and the Sick	Matthew 9:10-13; Mark 2:15-17; Luke 5:29-32	The scribes and Pharisees, with tax collectors, sinners, and the disciples present	5
11	The Bridegroom's Friends	Matthew 9:14-15; Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-35	The disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees	5
12	New Cloth on an Old Garment	Matthew 9:16; Mark 2:21; Luke 5:36	The disciples of John and the Pharisees	5
13	New Wine in Old Wineskins	Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37-39	The disciples of John and the Pharisees	5
14	Children in the Marketplace	Matthew 11:16-19; Luke 7:31-35	The crowds	5
15	The Two Debtors	Luke 7:36-50	Simon the Pharisee and his dinner guests, with a sinful woman present	5
16	A Kingdom Divided	Matthew 12:22-26; Mark 3:22-26; Luke 11:14-18	The scribes from Jerusalem and the Pharisees, with the crowds	5
17	Binding the Strong Man	Matthew 12:29; Mark 3:27; Luke 11:21-23	The scribes and Pharisees, with the crowds	5

No.	Parable	Where to read it	Who heard it	Ch.
18	The Unclean Spirit Returns	Matthew 12:43-45; Luke 11:24-26	The scribes and Pharisees, with the crowds	5
19	The Sower and the Four Soils	Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15	A great crowd on the shore of the Sea of Galilee; the explanation was given to the disciples in private	6
20	The Seed That Grows by Itself	Mark 4:26-29	The crowd by the sea	7
21	The Wheat and the Weeds	Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43	The crowd by the sea; the explanation was given to the disciples in the house	7
22	The Mustard Seed	Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19	The crowd by the sea; later, in Luke, people at a synagogue on the Sabbath	7
23	The Leaven	Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21	The crowd by the sea; later, in Luke, the same synagogue gathering	7
24	The Hidden Treasure	Matthew 13:44	The disciples, in the house	8
25	The Pearl of Great Price	Matthew 13:45-46	The disciples, in the house	8
26	The Dragnet	Matthew 13:47-50	The disciples, in the house	8
27	The Householder's Treasure, New and Old	Matthew 13:51-52	The disciples, in the house	8
28	What Defiles a Person	Matthew 15:1-20; Mark 7:1-23	The crowd, then the disciples in a house	9
29	The Children's Bread	Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30	A Gentile woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon, with the disciples present	9
30	The King's Sons Go Free	Matthew 17:24-27	Peter, in the house at Capernaum	9
31	The Unforgiving Servant	Matthew 18:21-35	Peter and the disciples	9
32	The Good Samaritan	Luke 10:25-37	A lawyer, an expert in the Law of Moses, with the disciples and others nearby	10
33	The Friend at Midnight	Luke 11:5-13	The disciples	11
34	The Rich Fool	Luke 12:13-21	A man from the crowd, with the crowd and the disciples listening	11
35	The Watchful Servants and the Doorkeeper	Luke 12:35-38; Mark 13:33-37	The disciples, with the crowd nearby; in Mark, Peter, James, John, and Andrew on the Mount of Olives	12
36	The Thief in the Night	Luke 12:39-40; Matthew 24:43-44	The disciples, with the crowd nearby; in Matthew, the disciples on the Mount of Olives	12
37	The Faithful and Unfaithful Manager	Luke 12:41-48; Matthew 24:45-51	Peter and the disciples; in Matthew, the disciples on the Mount of Olives	12
38	The Barren Fig Tree	Luke 13:6-9	People in the crowd who had brought news of the Galileans killed by Pilate	13
39	The Narrow Door and the Shut Door	Luke 13:22-30; Matthew 7:13-14	A questioner on the road, with the crowd; in Matthew, the disciples and crowds at the Sermon on the Mount	13
40	Choosing the Places at the Feast	Luke 14:7-14	The guests at a leading Pharisee's dinner, and then the host	14
41	The Great Banquet	Luke 14:15-24	A guest at the Pharisee's dinner, with the others at the table	14

No.	Parable	Where to read it	Who heard it	Ch.
42	The Tower Builder	Luke 14:28-30	The great crowds following Him on the road	14
43	The King Going to War	Luke 14:31-33	The great crowds following Him on the road	14
44	The Lost Sheep	Luke 15:3-7; Matthew 18:12-14	The Pharisees and scribes, with tax collectors and sinners listening; in Matthew, the disciples	15
45	The Lost Coin	Luke 15:8-10	The Pharisees and scribes, with tax collectors and sinners listening	15
46	The Lost Son and the Elder Brother	Luke 15:11-32	The Pharisees and scribes, with tax collectors and sinners listening	15
47	The Shrewd Manager	Luke 16:1-13	The disciples, with the Pharisees listening	16
48	The Rich Man and Lazarus	Luke 16:19-31	The Pharisees, who loved money and were ridiculing Him, with the disciples present	16
49	The Unworthy Servants	Luke 17:7-10	The apostles	17
50	The Persistent Widow	Luke 18:1-8	The disciples	17
51	The Pharisee and the Tax Collector	Luke 18:9-14	Some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and looked down on others	17
52	The Workers in the Vineyard	Matthew 20:1-16	Peter and the disciples	18
53	The Ten Minas	Luke 19:11-27	The crowd in and around Jericho, including the disciples	18
54	The Two Sons	Matthew 21:28-32	The chief priests and elders of the people, in the temple courts	19
55	The Wicked Tenants	Matthew 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19	The chief priests, scribes, elders, and Pharisees, with the people listening	19
56	The Wedding Feast of the King's Son	Matthew 22:1-14	The chief priests and Pharisees, with the people listening	19
57	The Fig Tree Putting Out Leaves	Matthew 24:32-35; Mark 13:28-31; Luke 21:29-33	Peter, James, John, Andrew, and the other disciples, on the Mount of Olives	20
58	The Ten Virgins	Matthew 25:1-13	The disciples, on the Mount of Olives	20
59	The Talents	Matthew 25:14-30	The disciples, on the Mount of Olives	20
60	The Sheep and the Goats	Matthew 25:31-46	The disciples, on the Mount of Olives	20
61	Fields White for Harvest	John 4:31-38	The disciples, at a well in Samaria	21
62	The Door of the Sheepfold	John 10:1-10	Pharisees, after Jesus healed a man born blind	21
63	The Good Shepherd	John 10:11-18	Pharisees and others in Jerusalem	21
64	The Grain of Wheat	John 12:20-26	Philip and Andrew, with some Greeks who wanted to see Jesus	21
65	The Woman in Labor	John 16:16-24	The disciples, on the night before the crucifixion	21
66	The Vine and the Branches	John 15:1-8	The disciples, on the night before the crucifixion	21

Appendix B: The Parables in the Four Gospels

This table lists each numbered parable with where it appears in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. A dash means that Gospel does not record it. Some parables appear in only one Gospel, and a few appear in three. John's word pictures appear only in John.

No.	Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
1	Salt of the Earth	5:13	9:49-50	14:34-35	-
2	The Light of the World and the Lamp on the Stand	5:14-16	4:21-22	8:16-17, 11:33	-
3	The Lamp of the Body	6:22-23	-	11:34-36	-
4	The Speck and the Log	7:3-5	-	6:41-42	-
5	The Blind Leading the Blind	15:12-14	-	6:39-40	-
6	The Father's Good Gifts	7:9-11	-	11:11-13	-
7	Trees and Their Fruit	7:15-20, 12:33-35	-	6:43-45	-
8	The Wise and Foolish Builders	7:24-27	-	6:46-49	-
9	Settle With Your Opponent on the Way	5:25-26	-	12:57-59	-
10	The Physician and the Sick	9:10-13	2:15-17	5:29-32	-
11	The Bridegroom's Friends	9:14-15	2:18-20	5:33-35	-
12	New Cloth on an Old Garment	9:16	2:21	5:36	-
13	New Wine in Old Wineskins	9:17	2:22	5:37-39	-
14	Children in the Marketplace	11:16-19	-	7:31-35	-
15	The Two Debtors	-	-	7:36-50	-
16	A Kingdom Divided	12:22-26	3:22-26	11:14-18	-
17	Binding the Strong Man	12:29	3:27	11:21-23	-
18	The Unclean Spirit Returns	12:43-45	-	11:24-26	-
19	The Sower and the Four Soils	13:1-23	4:1-20	8:4-15	-
20	The Seed That Grows by Itself	-	4:26-29	-	-
21	The Wheat and the Weeds	13:24-30, 36-43	-	-	-
22	The Mustard Seed	13:31-32	4:30-32	13:18-19	-
23	The Leaven	13:33	-	13:20-21	-
24	The Hidden Treasure	13:44	-	-	-
25	The Pearl of Great Price	13:45-46	-	-	-
26	The Dragnet	13:47-50	-	-	-
27	The Householder's Treasure, New and Old	13:51-52	-	-	-
28	What Defiles a Person	15:1-20	7:1-23	-	-
29	The Children's Bread	15:21-28	7:24-30	-	-
30	The King's Sons Go Free	17:24-27	-	-	-
31	The Unforgiving Servant	18:21-35	-	-	-

No.	Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
32	The Good Samaritan	-	-	10:25-37	-
33	The Friend at Midnight	-	-	11:5-13	-
34	The Rich Fool	-	-	12:13-21	-
35	The Watchful Servants and the Doorkeeper	-	13:33-37	12:35-38	-
36	The Thief in the Night	24:43-44	-	12:39-40	-
37	The Faithful and Unfaithful Manager	24:45-51	-	12:41-48	-
38	The Barren Fig Tree	-	-	13:6-9	-
39	The Narrow Door and the Shut Door	7:13-14	-	13:22-30	-
40	Choosing the Places at the Feast	-	-	14:7-14	-
41	The Great Banquet	-	-	14:15-24	-
42	The Tower Builder	-	-	14:28-30	-
43	The King Going to War	-	-	14:31-33	-
44	The Lost Sheep	18:12-14	-	15:3-7	-
45	The Lost Coin	-	-	15:8-10	-
46	The Lost Son and the Elder Brother	-	-	15:11-32	-
47	The Shrewd Manager	-	-	16:1-13	-
48	The Rich Man and Lazarus	-	-	16:19-31	-
49	The Unworthy Servants	-	-	17:7-10	-
50	The Persistent Widow	-	-	18:1-8	-
51	The Pharisee and the Tax Collector	-	-	18:9-14	-
52	The Workers in the Vineyard	20:1-16	-	-	-
53	The Ten Minas	-	-	19:11-27	-
54	The Two Sons	21:28-32	-	-	-
55	The Wicked Tenants	21:33-46	12:1-12	20:9-19	-
56	The Wedding Feast of the King's Son	22:1-14	-	-	-
57	The Fig Tree Putting Out Leaves	24:32-35	13:28-31	21:29-33	-
58	The Ten Virgins	25:1-13	-	-	-
59	The Talents	25:14-30	-	-	-
60	The Sheep and the Goats	25:31-46	-	-	-
61	Fields White for Harvest	-	-	-	4:31-38
62	The Door of the Sheepfold	-	-	-	10:1-10
63	The Good Shepherd	-	-	-	10:11-18
64	The Grain of Wheat	-	-	-	12:20-26
65	The Woman in Labor	-	-	-	16:16-24
66	The Vine and the Branches	-	-	-	15:1-8

Appendix C: Outside Sources at a Glance

Every **Behind the Story** box in this book carries one of three labels. **Text confirmed** means I checked the quoted words against a published translation of the original. **Background** means the box explains customs, money, plants, or places from Jesus' day in my own words, from standard Bible reference works. **Disputed** means scholars seriously disagree about the source or what it shows.

The two ancient writers quoted in this book are these:

- **Flavius Josephus** (about A.D. 37 to 100), a Jewish priest and historian who wrote *Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War*. He grew up in Jerusalem in the generation after Jesus and knew the land, the rulers, and the customs firsthand.
- **Pliny the Elder** (A.D. 23 or 24 to 79), a Roman officer and writer whose *Natural History* gathers what the Roman world knew about plants, animals, farming, and trade. He died in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

Box	Label	Chapter
Rabbinic parables	Background	1
Augustine and the good Samaritan	Background	3
The Gospel of Thomas	Disputed	3
Salt that loses its saltiness	Background	4
Floods in a dry land	Background	4
Tax collectors	Text confirmed	5
Wineskins	Background	5
The denarius	Background	5
How seed was sown	Background	6
A hundredfold	Text confirmed	6
Weeds in the wheat	Background	7
Mustard in the Roman world	Text confirmed	7
Buried treasure	Background	8
Pearls in the Roman world	Text confirmed	8
Clean and unclean fish	Background	8
The temple tax	Background	9
Ten thousand talents	Text confirmed	9
The road from Jerusalem to Jericho	Text confirmed	10
Jews and Samaritans	Text confirmed	10
Hospitality and a one-room house	Background	11
The watches of the night	Background	12
Pilate and the Galileans	Text confirmed	13
Fig trees in a vineyard	Background	13
Places of honor at a meal	Background	14
Two invitations	Background	14

Box	Label	Chapter
Shepherds and sheep	Background	15
Ten drachmas	Background	15
The younger son’s share	Background	15
Oil and wheat	Background	16
Purple and fine linen	Text confirmed	16
Widows and judges	Background	17
The Pharisees	Text confirmed	17
Day laborers and the hours of the day	Background	18
Archelaus goes to Rome for a kingdom	Text confirmed	18
Absentee landowners	Background	19
The wedding garment	Disputed	19
A wedding in Jesus’ day	Background	20
Sheep and goats	Background	20
The sheepfold	Background	21
The vine in Israel	Text confirmed	21

Appendix D: Words to Know

Allegory. A story in which many details stand for something else. Some parables have allegorical parts, but not every detail carries a hidden meaning (Chapter 3).

Darnel. A weed that looks like wheat while it is young, usually thought to be the "weeds" in Matthew 13:24-30.

Denarius. A Roman silver coin, about a day's wage for a working man (Matthew 20:2).

Drachma. A Greek silver coin worth about the same as a denarius (Luke 15:8).

Gentile. Anyone who is not Jewish.

Justified. Declared righteous by God, accepted as right with Him (Luke 18:14).

Kingdom of God, kingdom of the heavens. God's rule as King. It came in Jesus, is growing now, and will come in full when He returns. Matthew usually says "kingdom of the heavens," the other Gospels "kingdom of God." They mean the same thing.

Leaven. A lump of old, fermenting dough mixed into new dough to make it rise.

Levite. A member of the tribe of Levi who assisted the priests in the temple.

Mashal. The Hebrew word for a proverb, riddle, or story with a point. It stands behind the Greek word for parable.

Mina. A sum of money worth about a hundred denarii (Luke 19:13).

Olivet Discourse. Jesus' teaching about the end of the age, given on the Mount of Olives during His last week (Matthew 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21).

Parable. From the Greek *parabolē*, "a throwing beside." A story or comparison that lays something from ordinary life beside a truth about God (Chapter 1).

Paroimia. The Greek word John uses for Jesus' figures of speech, such as the good shepherd (John 10:6).

Pharisees. A Jewish movement devoted to careful keeping of the Law of Moses and the traditions of the elders.

Pre-tribulation. The view that Jesus will take His church to Himself in the Rapture before the seven years of Tribulation begin.

Propitious, propitiation. Favorable; the turning away of God's anger by a sacrifice. The tax collector prayed for God to be propitious to him (Luke 18:13), and Jesus is the propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:2).

Rapture. The moment when Jesus calls His church up to meet Him in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

Repentance. A change of mind and heart that turns from sin to God.

Samaritans. The people of the hill country between Judea and Galilee, partly descended from the old northern tribes, who worshiped on Mount Gerizim and were bitter enemies of the Jews in Jesus' day.

Scribe. A trained teacher and expert in the Law of Moses. Luke often calls them lawyers.

SLB. Steadfast Literal Bible, the translation quoted throughout this book.

Talent. The largest unit of money, a weight of silver worth about 6,000 denarii.

Tax collector. A local man who bought the right to collect tolls and taxes for Rome or its client rulers, often seen as a traitor and a cheat.

Tribulation. The seven-year period of judgment on the earth before Christ returns to reign.

Appendix E: Sources and Credits

All Scripture quotations are from the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). Words the translators supplied to make the English read smoothly are printed in bold italics.

Quotations from ancient writers come from these public domain translations:

- Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Wars of the Jews*, translated by William Whiston (1737), from the Project Gutenberg editions.
- Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, books 9, 18, and 19, translated by H. Rackham, W. H. S. Jones, and D. E. Eichholz, as posted on Wikisource.

These modern writers on the parables are named in Chapter 3. I describe their ideas in my own words and do not quote them:

- Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (The Parables of Jesus), first published in 1888.
- C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (1935).
- Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, first published in German in 1947.
- Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (1990; second edition 2012).

Augustine's reading of the good Samaritan (Chapter 3), the rabbinic parables (Chapter 1), and the Gospel of Thomas (Chapter 3) are summarized from standard reference works, because I could not open the original texts to check them myself. Details labeled Background come from standard Bible dictionaries and handbooks on life in Bible times.

About This Book

Ears to Hear gathers every parable of Jesus into one book, from salt and light in the Sermon on the Mount to the vine and the branches on the night before the cross. For each one it gives the Bible references, who first heard it, and what prompted Jesus to tell it.

It follows Jesus from Galilee, along the road to Jerusalem, into the temple courts in His last week, and through the great word pictures in John's Gospel. Along the way it explains the world the parables were told in, from the price of a pearl to the hatred between Jews and Samaritans, and it brings in the ancient writers Josephus and Pliny the Elder where they shed light, labeling each outside source honestly as confirmed, background, or disputed.

The book also answers the basic questions. What is a parable? Why did Jesus teach this way? How do we read a parable without missing the point or making it say what Jesus never meant? It lays out the main views fairly where good Christians disagree, and it closes with what the parables ask of each of us.

Every chapter ends with study questions for personal reading or small groups. The back of the book has a master list of parables, a table of the parables in the four Gospels, a guide to the outside sources, a glossary, and a Scripture index.

All Scripture quotations come from the Steadfast Literal Bible, which is free to read at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb.

Scripture Index

This index lists every Bible passage that is named with its book somewhere in the text, with the pages where it appears.

Genesis 13:2 (79); 18:6 (36); 26:12 (29); 45:22 (95)

Exodus 22:22-24 (82); 30:11-16 (44)

Leviticus 2:13 (16); 11:7 (72); 11:9-12 (40); 16:29 (83); 19:18 (48); 19:23 (62)

Numbers 19:11 (49); 27:1-11 (54)

Deuteronomy 6:5 (48); 10:18 (82); 16:18-20 (82); 21:17 (54, 72); 23:19 (77); 24:14-15 (86)

Judges 7:19 (58); 9:7-15 (6)

2 Samuel 12:1-4 (6); 12:1-13 (8); 12:7 (6); 12:13 (6)

2 Kings 10:22 (95); 17:24-41 (50)

Psalms 14:1 (55); 23:1 (70); 51:17 (84); 78:2 (10); 80:1 (70); 80:8 (108); 118:22-23 (94); 118:23 (96); 118:26 (94)

Proverbs 6:6-8 (55); 22:9 (18); 25:6-7 (65)

Isaiah 5:1-7 (6, 93, 96); 5:7 (6, 93, 108); 6:9-10 (9); 25:6 (66); 53:3 (51); 54:5 (23); 55:6 (111); 55:11 (28, 31); 61:10 (95); 62:5 (23)

Jeremiah 8:13 (62)

Lamentations 2:19 (58)

Ezekiel 17:1-10 (6); 17:2 (6); 17:23 (36); 20:49 (6); 34:11 (106); 34:16 (71); 34:23 (106); 36:26 (43)

Daniel 4:12 (36); 7:13-14 (89)

Hosea 2:19-20 (23); 6:6 (22); 9:10 (62); 10:12 (32)

Micah 7:1 (62)

Zechariah 4:10 (37)

Matthew 5:1-2 (16); 5:13 (16, 119); 5:14-16 (17, 119); 5:16 (17); 5:17 (24); 5:23-24 (20); 5:25-26 (20, 119); 5:26 (20); 5:44 (51); 6:12 (46); 6:19-24 (21); 6:21 (17); 6:22-23 (17, 119); 6:23 (17); 6:24 (17); 7:3-5 (18, 119); 7:5 (18); 7:9-11 (14, 19, 119); 7:11 (19); 7:13-14 (63, 120); 7:15 (19); 7:15-20 (19, 119); 7:20 (19); 7:21-23 (99); 7:24 (16); 7:24-27 (19, 20, 115, 119); 7:28-29 (16); 9:10-13 (22, 119); 9:13 (22); 9:14-15 (23, 119); 9:16 (23, 119); 9:17 (23, 119); 10:37 (68); 11:16-19 (24, 119); 11:16-17 (24); 11:18-19 (24); 11:19 (24); 12:22-26 (26, 119); 12:22-13:1 (28); 12:24 (10); 12:28 (26, 112); 12:29 (26, 119); 12:31-32 (10); 12:33-35 (19, 119); 12:43-45 (27, 120); 12:45 (27); 12:49-50 (102); 13:1-2 (28); 13:1-23 (28, 120); 13:3-9 (28, 32); 13:10-13 (9); 13:10-17 (11); 13:11 (10); 13:12 (10, 11); 13:14-15 (9); 13:16-17 (9); 13:18-23 (7, 29); 13:19 (30); 13:20-21 (30); 13:21 (30); 13:22 (31); 13:23 (31); 13:24-30 (34, 120, 127); 13:24-26 (34); 13:28 (34); 13:29-30 (34); 13:31-32 (35, 120); 13:31-33 (37); 13:33 (36, 37, 120); 13:34 (5); 13:35 (9, 10); 13:36-43 (34, 120); 13:37 (111); 13:37-43 (34); 13:38 (34); 13:42-43 (35); 13:44 (38, 41, 120); 13:45-46 (39, 120); 13:47-50 (40, 120); 13:50 (40); 13:51 (40); 13:51-52 (40, 120); 13:52 (40, 41, 114); 15:1-20 (42, 120); 15:12-14 (18, 119); 15:14 (18); 15:21-28 (43, 120); 15:24 (43); 15:28 (43); 16:6 (37); 17:20 (35); 17:24-27 (44, 120); 17:24-25 (44); 17:25-26 (44, 111); 17:27 (44); 18:12-14 (44, 70, 121); 18:14 (71); 18:15-17 (34); 18:21 (44); 18:21-35 (44, 120); 18:22 (44); 18:26 (45); 18:28 (45); 18:29 (45); 18:32-34 (45); 18:35 (42, 45, 114); 19:16-22 (86); 19:27 (13, 86, 90); 19:28-29 (86); 19:30 (86); 20:1-2 (86); 20:1-16 (86, 121); 20:2 (25, 127); 20:6-7 (87); 20:9-12 (87); 20:13-15 (87); 20:16 (86, 88); 20:17-19 (88); 20:20-28 (88); 21:9 (92, 94); 21:23 (92); 21:28-32 (92, 121); 21:28-30 (92); 21:31 (8, 22, 74); 21:31-32 (92); 21:33 (93); 21:33-46 (93, 121); 21:33-41 (96); 21:40-45 (8); 21:41 (93); 21:42 (92, 111); 21:42-44 (94); 21:43 (96); 21:45 (12); 21:45-46 (94); 22:1 (94); 22:1-14 (94, 121); 22:2 (111); 22:2-7 (95); 22:8 (95); 22:11-13 (95); 22:14 (96); 22:15 (96); 23:29-37 (94); 24:1-2 (97); 24:3 (97); 24:15 (98); 24:21 (97); 24:29 (97, 98); 24:32-35 (98, 121); 24:32-33 (98); 24:34-35 (98); 24:36 (98); 24:42-51 (57); 24:43-44 (58, 120); 24:45-51 (59, 120); 24:51 (59); 25:1-5 (99); 25:1-13 (98, 121); 25:6 (111); 25:6-10 (99); 25:11-13 (99); 25:13 (97); 25:14-30 (100, 121); 25:14-15 (100); 25:19 (100, 111); 25:20-23 (100); 25:21 (117); 25:24 (110); 25:24-27 (100); 25:31-46 (101, 121); 25:31-33 (101); 25:31-34 (111); 25:34 (101); 25:35-36 (103); 25:40 (101); 25:46 (101); 28:10 (102); 28:18 (89)

Mark 1:11 (93); 2:15-17 (22, 119); 2:17 (22, 111); 2:18-20 (23, 119); 2:19 (23); 2:19-20 (111); 2:20 (23); 2:21 (23, 119); 2:22 (23, 24, 119); 3:21 (28); 3:22 (26); 3:22-26 (26, 119); 3:23 (26); 3:24-26 (26); 3:27 (26, 119); 3:31 (28); 4:1-20 (28, 120); 4:9 (1, 3, 11, 113); 4:10 (29); 4:13 (12, 28, 32); 4:14 (30); 4:19 (31); 4:20 (31); 4:21-22 (17, 119); 4:24 (11); 4:26-29 (33, 120); 4:30 (33); 4:30-32 (35, 120); 4:34 (5, 10, 113); 7:1-23 (42, 120); 7:9-13 (42); 7:14-15 (42); 7:17 (5, 42); 7:19 (43); 7:20-23 (42, 46); 7:24-30 (43, 120); 7:26 (43);

7:27 (43); 7:28-29 (43); 9:49-50 (16, 119); 9:50 (17); 10:45 (57); 10:46-52 (88); 12:1-12 (93, 121); 12:6-8 (93, 111); 12:28-31 (48); 12:39 (65); 13:28-31 (98, 121); 13:33-37 (57, 120); 13:35 (58); 13:37 (58)

Luke 4:23 (5); 5:29 (22); 5:29-32 (22, 119); 5:33-35 (23, 119); 5:36 (23, 119); 5:37-39 (23, 119); 5:39 (24); 6:17 (16); 6:39 (18); 6:39-40 (18, 119); 6:40 (18); 6:41-42 (18, 119); 6:43-45 (19, 119); 6:45 (19); 6:46-49 (19, 119); 6:48 (20); 7:31-35 (24, 119); 7:36-50 (25, 27, 119); 7:39 (25); 7:41-43 (25); 7:47 (25); 7:50 (25); 8:4-15 (28, 120); 8:11 (30); 8:12 (30); 8:14 (31); 8:15 (31, 32); 8:16-17 (17, 119); 8:18 (11, 32, 113); 9:51 (48); 9:51-56 (50); 10:25 (48); 10:25-37 (48, 120); 10:28 (48); 10:29 (48); 10:30 (49); 10:31-32 (49); 10:33-35 (50); 10:36 (8); 10:36-37 (50); 10:37 (12, 48); 11:1 (53); 11:2-4 (53); 11:5-7 (53); 11:5-13 (53, 56, 120); 11:8 (53); 11:9 (54); 11:9-10 (54); 11:11-13 (19, 119); 11:13 (19, 54); 11:14-18 (26, 119); 11:16 (79); 11:21-23 (26, 119); 11:21-22 (26, 111); 11:23 (26); 11:24-26 (27, 120); 11:29 (79); 11:33 (17); 11:34-36 (17, 119); 12:1 (54); 12:13-21 (54, 120); 12:13-15 (54); 12:15 (53, 56); 12:16-19 (55); 12:17-19 (56); 12:20-21 (55); 12:23 (55); 12:33-34 (55); 12:35-38 (57, 120); 12:35-36 (57); 12:37 (60, 81); 12:37-38 (57); 12:39-40 (58, 120); 12:40 (57, 58); 12:41-48 (59, 120); 12:42-44 (59); 12:46 (59); 12:47-48 (59); 12:48 (60); 12:56-59 (20); 12:57-59 (20, 119); 13:1 (61); 13:2-5 (61); 13:6-9 (62, 120); 13:7 (62); 13:10-17 (63); 13:18-19 (35, 120); 13:18-21 (63); 13:20-21 (36, 120); 13:22-30 (63, 120); 13:23 (63); 13:24 (61, 64); 13:24-27 (63); 13:25-27 (99); 13:28-30 (63); 13:31-33 (64); 13:32 (2); 13:34 (64); 14:1 (65); 14:2-6 (65); 14:7 (65); 14:7-14 (65, 120); 14:8-11 (65); 14:14 (66); 14:15 (65, 66); 14:15-24 (66, 120); 14:16-17 (66); 14:17 (116); 14:18-20 (66, 69); 14:21 (67); 14:24 (67); 14:26-27 (67); 14:28-30 (68, 121); 14:31-33 (68, 121); 14:33 (68); 14:34-35 (16, 69, 119); 14:35 (16); 15:1-2 (13, 14, 70, 75); 15:3 (70); 15:3-7 (70, 121); 15:4-6 (70); 15:7 (71); 15:8 (127); 15:8-9 (71); 15:8-10 (71, 121); 15:10 (70, 72, 117); 15:11 (11, 72); 15:11-32 (72, 121); 15:12 (72); 15:13 (72); 15:17-19 (72); 15:20 (73, 110); 15:21 (73); 15:22-24 (73); 15:29-30 (74); 15:30 (72); 15:31-32 (74); 16:1 (76); 16:1-2 (76); 16:1-13 (76, 121); 16:3 (76); 16:5-7 (76); 16:8 (77); 16:9 (77); 16:10-13 (77, 80); 16:13 (76); 16:14 (76, 78); 16:15 (78); 16:19 (76); 16:19-31 (78, 121); 16:19-21 (78); 16:22-24 (79); 16:25-26 (79); 16:27-31 (79); 17:3-4 (81); 17:5 (81); 17:6 (81); 17:7-10 (81, 84, 121); 17:20-37 (82); 17:22-37 (83); 18:1 (13, 14, 82, 114); 18:1-8 (82, 121); 18:2-5 (82); 18:6-8 (13, 82); 18:9-14 (83, 121); 18:9-10 (83); 18:11-12 (83, 85); 18:12 (23); 18:13 (84, 117, 127); 18:14 (81, 84, 114, 127); 19:1-10 (88); 19:10 (88); 19:11-27 (88, 121); 19:11-12 (88); 19:12 (111); 19:13 (89, 127); 19:14 (89); 19:16-19 (89); 19:20-23 (89); 19:26 (89); 19:27 (89); 20:9-19 (93, 121); 21:29 (98); 21:29-33 (98, 121); 23:42-43 (87); 24:27 (41)

John 3:1-2 (83); 4:9 (50); 4:20 (50); 4:29 (104); 4:31-38 (104, 121); 4:31-34 (104); 4:35-36 (104); 4:38 (105); 4:39-42 (104); 6:35 (104); 8:12 (17); 8:48 (51); 9:2 (61); 9:40 (105); 10:1-5 (105); 10:1-10 (105, 121); 10:6 (5, 104, 105, 127); 10:7-10 (105); 10:9 (64, 111, 117); 10:11 (104, 111); 10:11-18 (106, 109, 121); 10:11-13 (106); 10:14-16 (106); 10:17-18 (106); 11:25 (104); 12:10-11 (79); 12:20-26 (107, 121); 12:21 (107); 12:23-24 (107); 12:24 (111); 12:25-26 (107); 12:32 (107); 13:4-5 (57); 14:31 (108); 15:1 (111); 15:1-8 (108, 121); 15:1-5 (108); 15:6-8 (109); 16:16 (107); 16:16-24 (107, 121); 16:20-22 (108); 16:25 (104); 19:15 (90)

Acts 4:11 (94); 5:34-39 (83); 10:9-16 (43); 17:11 (3)

Romans 1:16 (43); 8:22-23 (108); 10:9 (117); 11:1-2 (96); 11:2 (94); 11:26 (94); 12:19 (46); 14:12 (78)

1 Corinthians 3:6 (33); 3:8 (82); 5:6 (37); 9:19 (44)

Galatians 2:16 (84)

Ephesians 2:8 (110); 2:8-9 (45, 116)

Philippians 2:5-11 (66); 3:5 (83); 3:7-8 (41); 3:8 (38)

1 Thessalonians 1:10 (97); 4:13-18 (97); 4:16-17 (58, 127); 5:2 (58); 5:4 (58)

1 Timothy 5:8 (55); 6:17-18 (56)

Hebrews 1:1-2 (94); 9:27 (79)

James 1:22 (113); 2:15-16 (51); 2:17 (102); 4:14 (56)

1 Peter 5:8 (37)

2 Peter 3:3-4 (60); 3:9 (35, 62); 3:10 (58)

1 John 2:2 (84, 127); 3:8 (26)

Revelation 3:3 (58); 3:10 (97); 3:20 (116, 118); 5:5 (37); 6:10 (83); 16:15 (58); 19:8 (96); 20:1-3 (26)