

The Parables and the Kingdom of God

By

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The Parables of Jesus: Cultivating a Kingdom Culture

Lesson 1 – Introduction

Purpose of Studying the Parables: The purpose of this study is to allow Jesus' parables to cultivate a kingdom culture in our lives. Simply stated, the parables give us information about what life in the kingdom of God is like so that we can embody God's kingdom in all areas of our lives. This study is about more than learning information. It is about forming a Christ-like identity. These lessons are here to engage our hearts and minds with the teaching of Jesus Christ so we can be the kind of people God wants us to be.

What is your favorite or most memorable parable of Jesus?

Why do you think studying the parables might be important?

- The parables are important because they give us access into how Jesus saw the kingdom of God and how we are to live as citizens of that kingdom.

Parables have layers:

One of the ways Jesus taught us about the kingdom of God was through simple stories that had different levels of meanings. In the movie Shrek, Shrek the ogre tells Donkey that ogres are like onions...they have layers. Jesus parables also have layers and the more you unpeel them the more meaning and depth they produce. Most parables have two levels of meaning. There is the surface level of the details of the story being told and then there is the underlying meaning. For instance, Jesus tells a parable about a shepherd who loses a sheep. He goes out to find the sheep and brings it back to the sheep pen. This is not a story about sheep. It is a story about people being lost from God and who need someone to go and bring them back.

Group Exercise: Take these more popular parables and mention what the deeper meaning is. Here is the parable name and the surface meaning...have the group give you a deeper meaning for each one.

- **Sower:** A man goes out and sows some seed
- **Prodigal Son:** A son leaves home, wastes his possessions and returns home to be with his dad
- **Treasure in a Field:** Someone finds a hidden treasure in a field, they sell all they have to buy that field

As we study the parables together, we will be getting beneath the surface to the deeper meaning. The purpose of that is so our hearts can get more in tune with the Jesus and God's kingdom.

The importance and supremacy of Jesus' teaching

Before we dive into the parables it is important to recognize the importance of Jesus' teaching so we will really listen to what he is teaching us and put it into practice in very real ways.

What makes the teachings of Jesus' so important?

What makes Jesus' teaching more important than reading a self-help book or asking the opinion of our friends?

Jesus is the greatest teacher who has ever lived. His words went beyond teaching information. Jesus' words are the words of life (**John 6:68**) because Jesus is the Word of God made flesh (**John 1:14**). As we study the parables we have to remember that Jesus' teaching is not on the level of other places we turn for advice. Jesus is on a greater level than the opinions of our friends or a self-help book we might pick up to find answers. Jesus' words will bring us life if we take them seriously and live by them. Because of that, Jesus' teachings serve as a foundation for our lives.

We will conclude with the parable of the Wise & Foolish Builders (Read Matthew 7:24-29)

What are the similarities between the wise and foolish builders?

- They both heard the words of Jesus and they were both building something

What does Jesus say is the difference between the wise and foolish builders?

- One put Jesus' teachings into practice and the other did not
- One built based on the foundation of Jesus' teachings and the other built on a different foundation

Why is it important that we take Jesus' teachings seriously?

There was a man in Ukraine named Sasha who found a Bible. He began to read it and was really interested in what he was reading. He started spending more and more time in scripture. After reading some teachings from Jesus he decided to make a list of his enemies. In obedience to Jesus' teaching he began to pray for his enemies and started doing good things for them (Matthew 5:44). After a few months of this he realized he didn't have any enemies left. They were all his friends!

If we take Jesus seriously it has to be more than fact in our heads. It has to be lived out. When we live these teachings out, it will change us to be more like Jesus. That is what God is after in our lives in the first place (**Read 2 Cor 3:18**).

Application:

Why is it important that we become more and more like Jesus?

What has it taken in your life to start to see that change take place?

What is one thing you can do this week to embrace and embody a teaching of Jesus?

Lesson 2 – Something New is Happening

Jesus came to this earth to establish a **new covenant** between God and mankind. That new covenant is a kind of revolution where God's kingdom takes priority over the kingdoms of this world. Many of Jesus' parables were about exactly what that kingdom is like and how God expects his people to live in it. When something new happens it takes people a while to realize that the old ways of looking at things are no longer valid. *What makes transitions from old things to new things difficult?*

In Mark 2 we have some Pharisees who are stuck in the old way of doing things. They have questions for Jesus because the way he is ministering is not lining up with what they expect.

Read Mark 2:18-22

This wasn't about how his disciples were acting. It was about Jesus himself and who he is. If you really understand who Jesus is, you would understand why his disciples aren't fasting.

How are guests supposed to feel during a wedding?

- Joy and happiness!

What are guests expected to do during a wedding celebration?

- Feast and enjoy the party

Why does Jesus say his disciples aren't fasting?

- Because you don't fast during a wedding ceremony, while in the room with the groom.

Finding the deeper meaning

The Jewish people looked forward to the Messiah's coming and believed it would be like a wedding ceremony where God was reunited with his people.

How is Jesus like a groom ready for his wedding?

- A wedding ceremony marks the beginning of a new relationship. Jesus came restore the relationship between God and mankind.

Jesus' presence on the earth is cause for celebration. It means the kingdom of God is at hand. Something new is breaking in to the world as we know it because the Messiah has come to set the world free from sin and death.

How do we celebrate Jesus today?

New patches & New wineskins (Read Mark 2:21-22)

Jesus continues the wedding theme with two things that are connected with weddings in Jesus' day: new clothes and wine.

What happens to your clothes when you wash them for the first time?

Let's say you had an old pair of pants that got a whole worn in the knee. You decide to patch it up with a brand new patch of the same material and then wash it. *What will happen to the pants if the new patch shrinks?*

What about the wineskins? If you put new wine in a new wineskin, the wineskin will expand as the wine ferments. It will reach a point where it won't expand anymore. If you were to put new wine in an old wineskin the fermenting new wine would burst the skins.

Finding the deeper meaning

Jesus is comparing something old ways of thinking and doing things with new ways. He is saying there is an old way that just won't fit with the new way, the way of the true Messiah.

What is the old way Jesus is talking about that the Pharisees are so wrapped up in?

- The Law of Moses

What do you think Jesus is saying is the new way?

- The way of the Messiah – the replacement of the Law of Moses with the sacrifice of Christ and the grace God is pouring out on mankind.

Once you understand God's new way of doing things you realize the old way will no longer fit.

Read Romans 3:20-24

Something new is happening and it is all about Jesus. If you pour Jesus into the Law of Moses he will burst the seams...it cannot contain him. That is why he made a new covenant with us because the Old Covenant and Law was not sufficient.

What does Romans 3:20 tell us trying to obey the Law of Moses was unable to do?

How then are people made righteous today apart from the Law of Moses (Rom 3:21-24)?

Application

What is God looking for in us in response to this good news? (3:22)

Some of us have been in church for a few months and others of us for decades. The Gospel of Christ is new and exciting. Once you hear it for the 1000th time it can seem old and normal but it is anything but normal. *How can we keep the newness of the story of Christ fresh in our minds and not let it get "old" and "normal"?*

Are you ever tempted to think your righteousness is completely dependent upon your own good deeds? How might you rely more on the only source of righteousness available, Jesus Christ?

As we study the parables we will learn more and more about this new God wants us to live.

Lesson 3 – Step #1: Tie Up the Devil

In the last lesson we learned that Jesus came to start something new in this world. When Jesus taught in parables a lot of his teaching was about exactly what that new thing. Jesus called it the **kingdom of God**. Jesus paints many pictures for us about how God's kingdom will overcome the world and the powers of evil and darkness that are real and present in this world.

When reading the Gospels is that Jesus faced opposition. The main person who stands in Jesus' way is Satan. Unfortunately there is a growing belief among Christians that Satan (or the devil) is not actually a real being. A 2009 Barna survey of Christians found that 40% is not a living being but is just symbolic of evil in general. Before we go any further we have to recognize that Satan is real and he is seeking to oppose God's kingdom at every opportunity.

Why do you think people have a hard time believing Satan is real?

- We live in a secularized society that doesn't really talk much about spiritual things
- Bible lessons, sermons, classes, etc don't usually spend much time on Satan

Here are a few reasons we can be sure Satan is very real:

1. Jesus had conversation with Satan and talked about Satan as a very real being (Matthew 4:1-11).
2. Jesus' followers believed the same thing
 - a. Peter – 1 Peter 5:8
 - b. Paul – 2 Cor 2:11
 - c. John – Revelation 2:13
 - d. James – James 3:15
3. Effects have causes – God doesn't cause evil so where does it come from? Gen 3:1-4 tells us it was the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve to sin and he is called by Jesus the "father of lies" and a murderer by Jesus (John 8:44)
4. When Satan is talked about in these passages he is spoken of in a personal way...he is a being with a personality and not the symbolic expression of all things evil.

If Satan is real and stands in the way of the kingdom of God then what did Jesus do about that? Today's parable will answer that question.

Finding the deeper meaning (Read Mark 3:22-27)

This is more than a recipe for how to rob someone's house. This is about Jesus' own mission against Satan and the powers of darkness in the world.

Who is the strong man and who is the one robbing his house?

- Strong man – Satan
- Man robbing his house - Jesus

Who is Jesus taking back from Satan?

- Jesus is talking about saving people from the power of the devil.

What does Jesus first have to do before he can take people back from the devil?

- Jesus is saying that before he can take Satan's possessions he first has to go and tie up the strong man, Satan, so that he can take things (people) back out of Satan's household.

Mark 1:21-18 gives us a glimpse into one way Jesus released people from the power of Satan
What is the word that is used a few times in these verses to describe Jesus?

- Authority

How did Jesus cast the demon out of the man?

- He commanded it to come out

How did the demon react to Jesus' command? Why?

- Obedience
- Because Jesus had authority over the evil spirit

Jesus' Resurrection as the Ultimate Defeat of Satan

The most significant way Jesus has "tied up the strong man" is through his resurrection. In the resurrection Jesus showed that sin and death had no power over him. Even more than that, Jesus invites us all to take part in the resurrection of the dead when he comes back.

Application

What are some things Jesus has rescued you from?

Why is it important to you that Jesus has authority over the devil?

What if he didn't...what would your life be like?

What does the resurrection mean to you? How does it give you hope?

Lesson 4 – Let's Get to Sowing

Read Mark 4:1-9

In Mark 4 Jesus tells us about a farmer who went into his field and scattered some seed (how they used to plant their crops). The guy is throwing seed all over the place. Some goes in the weeds, some on the path, and some on good soil

Sum up the four types of soil Jesus describes

What is it that makes the difference for how well the seed grows and lasts?

Jesus explains the parable (Read Mark 4:13-20)

Who is the Sower?

What does Jesus say the seed represents?

Notice that God's Word is powerful and effective. When it gets into people's lives it does something. It isn't neutral. It is powerful and effective (Hebrews 4:12).

How have you seen God's Word make an impact on your life?

What does Jesus say the different soils represent?

We all fit in this parable somewhere. Every single person who hears the word of God is like that soil. The question for us is this, *which type of soil are we going to be?*

Your type of soil is not fixed. It can change. Jesus is not dooming us to only be one kind of soil.

Why is it important to know you don't have to stay in rocky soil?

How can you change the soil of your heart to be good soil that God can work with?

- The more we listen, see and understand, the more God can work on our hearts and soften us up to receive His Words and grow.
- Fully relying on God and his grace to help us grow
- It is possible to hear Jesus and see Jesus but not really "get it" (**Mark 4:10-12**)

What does Jesus say happens when the seed lands on good soil?

What Jesus is not saying - Jesus is not saying that if you believe what he is teaching that your savings account will automatically go up by 30, 60 or 100 times.

What kind of growth is Jesus talking about?

- Jesus is saying that when you put your faith in Jesus, God will be at work in your life to make your life spiritually full and abundant.

Jesus is liberal with the message

Notice how the sower scatters seed all over the place. Jesus is liberal with where he scatters the seed...he will preach to anyone who will listen. It can be tempting to prejudge someone's heart and just figure they may not care about God but you never know until you ask! If we are to follow Jesus' example, we should talk to anyone who will listen too.

We too can be sowers

As we grow and mature and our roots get deeper, we too can be sowers of God's Word. It may mean that we teach. It might be that we share our faith with a friend or neighbor. Maybe we offer encouragement from scripture to someone who is suffering. When God's Word is in us, it can't help but come out.

Application

Is your life producing what God wants it to produce or are things getting in the way and choking out the growth God desires?

If things are choking growth out of your life, what will it take to clear those thorns and rocks out of the way so you can grow?

What are some things you feel are distracting you from growing closer to God?

How do we sow seed to people today as Jesus did in his ministry?

Who are some people you know who need to hear about God? Who can you invite to group next week?

How might you sow the word of God to others?

Lesson 5 – God’s Kingdom is Growing

Read Mark 4:26-29 (Parable of the Growing Seed)

In the last parable, Jesus told us that he was out in the world sowing God’s word to anyone who would listen. Now Jesus gets more specific and begins teaching us things about how God’s kingdom really works.

What does Jesus say the farmer does?

What does he say the seed does?

How good is the farmer’s understanding of exactly how that seed becomes a full grown plant?

When that seed is in the ground there is something happening, though the farmer doesn’t see it and doesn’t even understand everything about the process of going from seed to full grown plant, it is still happening.

Jesus is saying that God’s Word is being preached and it is up to something beneath the surface. Whether we see it and understand it or not...it is still happening.

Did people understand what Jesus was really doing in his ministry?

Jesus was not always understood during his ministry. The people who should have understood him often tried to kill him. Other times people didn’t understand what he was saying. At other times people said he did miracles by the power of the devil...talk about being misunderstood! At the root of it all was a misunderstanding people had about God’s kingdom. The biggest problem people had was they were trying to see God’s kingdom in worldly ways and that resulted in them not seeing it or understanding it when it was right in front of their eyes.

What kind of misunderstandings did people have about the Messiah and what he was supposed to do?

- Some thought the Messiah would be a political and military figure who would destroy their oppressors and bring freedom to Israel.

The kingdom of God is not always easy to understand. In fact, parts of it are nearly impossible to figure out, just like a farmer in the ancient world didn’t understand how a seed became a plant.

Does seed depend on our knowledge of how it grows, in order for it to actually become a plant?

The kingdom of God is like that too...God is up to some things we may never fully understand and yet the kingdom of God is growing. Sometimes it is growing under the surface and sometimes the growth is more visible than that as it becomes a full grown plant.

God is patiently waiting

It has been nearly 2000 years since Jesus taught this parable and the seed is still growing. It hasn't yet become fully grown. But there will come a time when there is no more waiting for the kingdom of God to come in all of its glory.

What does Jesus say is the final thing to happen to the crop?

Jesus is quoting from Joel 3:12-13 which is a verse about the day of the Lord and the final judgment of mankind.

God will judge the earth. It is not a matter of if he will but when he will. Will he find us ready?

Read Mark 4:30-32 (Parable of the Mustard Seed)

A mustard seed is especially tiny. In Jesus' day they even used the phrase "as small as a mustard seed" to describe things. What was so unusual about the mustard plant was that within a single season it could grow from the smallest seed to a shrub that was over six feet high.

How did Jesus' ministry start small?

- He called just a few disciples at a time

How fast did Christianity grow once it took root?

How well has it spread since Jesus spoke these words 2000 years ago?

What Jesus said is right, God's kingdom starts small but grows large. In the process it becomes the home of all sorts of people who have found rest in its branches.

How do you see the kingdom of God growing today?

How do you think God's kingdom is growing in ways that are not as easily seen?

Application

What kind of hope does it give you to know that God, who is sovereign over all creation, is advancing his kingdom whether the world understands it or not?

How might you reflect this growing kingdom in your relationships, job, family, etc?

Who are some people you know who are not a part of God's kingdom, who might just need an invitation to come and experience God's growing kingdom in their lives?

Lesson 6 – The Wheat and the Weeds

Read Matthew 13:24-30

We are going to cover one last parable about sowing seeds and growing plants. This time there is a new twist.

What happens differently in this parable than in the others?

Some people think the weeds that were sown was a particular kind of weed that is found in the Middle East that actually resembles wheat as it grows, so it is hard to tell the two apart at first (this weed is called darnel, for those who like that sort of information).

We know from past lessons that the sower is Jesus. This time we have a new person in the story, the enemy. *What does the enemy do to try to stop the growing of the wheat?*

Who do you think this “enemy” represents? – The devil

What do you think the wheat & weeds represent? – good and evil/righteous and unrighteous

What suggestion did the workers give to the owner?

Their reaction was pretty natural. When you see the presence of evil in the world, you should want to immediately root it out. Now, before we go any further, it is important that we don't try to stretch this parable too far. This parable may not be as much about how we deal with evil...and so it leaves us figuring that we are to never say anything about evil and just leave evil things alone to happen as they will.

Read Matthew 13:36-43

This parable is about something else. Just as the parable of the growing seed ended with a harvest of judgment, this parable has something to say about evil and judgment too.

There are two main points here

1 - God is well aware that evil and good will co-exist in the present world

God doesn't remove all evil right on the spot. We know that to be true because we see it all the time.

Have you ever wished evil would just be plucked out of the world? When was a time you felt that way?

2 – God is eventually going to do something to bring an end to the evil in the world

What is God going to do, as we see at the end of this parable?

God is going to bring both judgment and reward. There is going to be a great separation of good and evil, wicked and righteous.

What does Jesus say happens to the weeds and then to the wheat?

What do you think Jesus means by the weeds being burned?

What do you think Jesus means when he says the wheat will be "in God's storehouse"?

Application

The victory has already been won...we just have to wait patiently for God to make good on all of his promises to us.

How do we, as Christians, deal with evil in the world?

Does knowing God is ultimately going to do something about all of this give you some hope?

How might we encourage people who are going through great trials? Is anyone in the group going through something that they need encouraged about/support?

This world is a tough place. We have to gather around each other and offer each other love and support in order to continue to persevere.

Lesson 7 –Receiving Forgiveness

Where we have been and where we are going:

The previous parables talked about the nature of God's kingdom and how God's kingdom grows. These next few parables will be about what life inside the kingdom is like. Last, in a few weeks we will dig into some parables about the end of time and what God's kingdom is like when Jesus returns.

The Parable of the Debtors (Read Luke 7:36-39)

Context is so important when we study scripture. What Jesus is about to teach us have everything to do with this story. We cannot understand the parable that follows until we understand the events that had just taken place that led Jesus to tell the parable that follows.

What did this lady do for Jesus?

How well was it received by those who were there with Jesus?

Read Luke 7:40-50

A denarii is about one day's pay. One guy owes a year and a half of wages and the other guy owes a month and a half. *How would you feel if someone just completely wrote off that kind of debt?*

How much capability does Jesus say these men had to pay back the one they owed the money to?

How do you define the word "grace"? Does that word accurately describe this lender?

When a great burden is lifted off your shoulders like that it makes you want to rejoice. What would you think if you told your friends and neighbors good news like this and all they wanted to do was discourage you about it?

Compare that example to Simon the Pharisee. *What was his reaction to this woman and her interaction with Jesus?*

What was Jesus trying to get Simon to see?

What is Jesus trying to get us to see as well?

There are a few things this parable teaches against

1. Labeling people – Sometimes people get a label and for the rest of their life people only see them through that label.
 - a. *How does this parable teach against that?*
2. Being unforgiving (holding past sins against someone)
 - a. *What was Jesus' attitude toward this woman?*

- b. *What should be our attitude toward people?*
- c. *Do we all have “baggage” or only just a few really bad people have that?*
- d. *What does that teach us about how to view and treat others?*

What does Jesus do for this woman?

Bottom line is this – we don’t ever stand in the way between people and Jesus. Ever.

Read 1 Timothy 1:15-17

What does Paul call himself in these verses?

What does Paul tell us came out of that situation in 1:16?

Why does Paul say Jesus came to the earth?

Saving the lost was Jesus primary objective. Jesus came to bring salvation. Even Jesus’ name means “God is salvation”. Paul says Jesus came to save those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

Now, look back at the story of the woman who anointed Jesus. She was exactly where she needed to be. She needed to be with Jesus because she needed salvation too. The truth of the matter is, we all have to be humble because, like Paul, apart from Jesus we are all the worst of sinners in need of salvation.

Application

How do we avoid the role of the Pharisee who tries to keep away from Jesus those who need him most?

How do we realize our connection with this woman in our deep need to be in the presence of our Lord precisely because we are sinners in need of forgiveness?

How much does the Lord’s forgiveness of your sins mean to you, why?

Even though Jesus is not physically present with us that we might anoint him and show him how much we love him to his face, how might we show this same kind of dependence and devotion to Christ today?

Lesson 8 – Forgiving Others

Last week we talked about the forgiveness we receive from Christ. This week we are going to talk about how that should result in us having a forgiving spirit toward others.

Read Matthew 18:21-35

Like many of the parables, this parable is here to help us put forgiveness in perspective. **Have someone retell this parable as if it was happening in today's world (\$ instead of denarii...remember 10,000 talents is millions of dollars)**

Who do you think these different people in the parable represent?

- King – God
- Servant #1 – a person forgiven by God
- Servant #2 – another person forgiven by God

This parable teaches us about God and about ourselves. First we will tackle what it teaches us about God.

What do you learn about God from this parable?

God is loving and merciful. He is willing to forgive much, even a debt that is impossible to pay back. That last part is one of the main points in the story. This guy could have never paid it all back. How would you pay back \$50 million dollars in debt?

Do we have any debt to God that is impossible to repay?

Read Romans 3:23-24

The word “redemption” is a marketplace word. It is a word that was used to describe a type of transaction, specifically paying for someone’s freedom (ransom).

Ephesians 1:7 tells us the way God purchased us was with the blood of Jesus Christ.

What does Paul say is the result of our being purchased by the blood of Christ in that verse?

Forgiveness is a part of who God is. It is the natural outflow of God’s character because we know that God is love (1 John 4:8) and that God loves us (John 3:16). So in this parable the king is very merciful and forgiving to his servants.

What happens in the parable that turns the king’s attitude from grace and forgiveness to judgment?

What is it about what the servant did that was so upsetting to the king?

What did that show about his own understanding and appreciation for what the king had done for him?

Second, this parable teaches us a lot about ourselves

What does this parable teach us about ourselves and how we view and treat others?

How do we justify treating people in unfair ways?

How should God's forgiveness of our own faults and failures instruct us to treat people with mercy and grace?

Application

Someone once said having an unforgiving attitude toward someone is like taking poison ourselves, hoping to harm the other person. It just hurts us. *Do you agree with that thought? Why/why not?*

Why is forgiveness so liberating and holding onto unforgiveness so poisonous?

Think of someone you know who you are holding something against? When we close with a prayer, ask God to help you let it go and to have a healthier attitude toward that person

When you think of all God has forgiven you for, what does it make you think about God and his infinite mercy and grace?

Lesson 9 – The Ultimate Value of God’s Kingdom

Read Matthew 13:44-46

Imagine living in a world where there were no safes or safety deposit boxes. Imagine also a world that wasn’t always a safe one to live on. There was risk everywhere. *What do you do with your stuff if you are going away on a long trip?* As you can imagine, if something happens to you while you are gone there may not be anyone around who knows what you buried or where you buried it. So here comes this guy who stumbles into some partially unburied treasure.

What would you do?

What does Jesus start this parable saying he is talking about?

Jesus is talking about God’s kingdom. *What does it say about God’s kingdom that Jesus compares it to a great treasure?*

How would you feel if you found a huge treasure?

Why is discovering something so exciting?

Joy – this man had great joy. He had great joy because he stumbled upon the most amazing thing he had ever discovered.

Why should being a Christian, part of God’s kingdom, give us great joy?

How can something Jesus describes as an amazing and valuable treasure become “ordinary” or “boring” to us?

- If you sleep on a pile of gold and jewels it will start feeling pretty normal.
- Once you are a Christian for decades, it can be a challenge to remember how exciting discovering God really is. Or maybe you grew up in church and don’t even remember the “Aha” moment of discovering Jesus.

What makes God’s kingdom so valuable?

If you have lost your spark, your joy, your feeling that Christianity is exciting...what would it take to get that back?

Jesus says the kingdom isn’t always obvious

What about this parable shows us that? – It is hidden in the ground.

What makes it hard for some people to have faith in Jesus?

How can we help non-Christians discover the joy and hope that comes from discovering God's kingdom?

The Pearl of Great Price

The second parable is about a man who found a valuable pearl. Like the first man, he realized he had something of great value. *What did this do in response to his great discovery?*

What do you think it means that he sold everything he had in order to get that pearl?

- God's kingdom is worth more than everything you have combined
- We cannot let anything get in the way of getting it

Has there ever been something you wanted so badly that you made great sacrifices to make it happen?

What was it that made you go through all of that and give so much?

What makes God's kingdom so valuable that we should be willing to give whatever it takes to get it?

What have you given up to follow Jesus?

God's kingdom has great value and that value gives us joy even in the midst of great difficulty.

Application

Do you ever have a hard time remembering the value of God's kingdom?

Is there anything in your life you need to let go of in order to fully embrace God's kingdom?

Jesus tells us the kingdom should give us joy. *Do you ever struggle with having joy? If so, how might realizing your blessings as being a part of God's kingdom renew joy in your life?*

Lesson 10 – Reaching the Lost

It is important that we covered the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price last week before talking about what Jesus taught about reaching the lost. The reason for that is, it is hard to bring someone to something if you aren't convinced that thing has great value and can bring great joy like we talked about last week.

Read Luke 15:11-19

What we read here is a mess of epic proportions. *In what ways do you see this younger son making a mess of things with his father?*

- He demands his inheritance...that is a message to dad that says, "I wish you were dead"
- He doesn't use it wisely...he disrespectfully leaves home and "squandered" it
- Once he is out of resources a famine strikes leaving him, a Jew, to feed pigs (not kosher!)
- He not only lost all his dad's money...he lost his "friends" as well as he is left all alone to tend the pigs of a Gentile foreigner.

He was so desperate, what role was he ready to take on with his father just to get back home?

This is called being a rock bottom.

Have you ever been at rock bottom? What was it like?

Read Luke 15:20-31

How might you expect his father to react when he returns empty handed?

How did the father react to his son's return?

Digging deeper

Now, it is all well and good that this dad got his son back and all but what is Jesus actually teaching us here? It all goes back to who these characters represent and how they treat each other.

Who do you think the father represents?

- God

Who do you think the younger son represents? (See 15:1-2 for a clue)

- Lost people

Who do you think the older son represents? (See 15:1-2 for a clue)

- Pharisees and those who don't see lost people as worthy of being found

Reason to celebrate

The father saw something that the older brother didn't see. You can figure out what that was based on each of their responses to the return of the younger brother.

We already mentioned above that the father wanted to celebrate his son's return. *What two things did the father compare his son's return to in 15:24?*

The dead coming to life and lost things being found is reason to celebrate. This is how the father saw the return of the son...it was that important to him.

How did the older brother view the return of his brother?

How different is that from his dad?

There is a reversal in this story that is important that we catch. The younger brother said he would become like a slave if that meant he could just be in his father's house. The older brother viewed all the work he had already been doing for his father like he had been a slave in his father's house (15:29).

This brings up a few questions for us.

Application

What is our attitude in why we serve God? Do we serve God because we fear hell and so we do it grudgingly. Or do we serve God out of a deep love that we have for him?

How do you view lost people? Do you view them with the love of the father or with the bitterness of the older brother? Do you think lost people are worth your time or do you not even think twice about their need to reconcile their relationship with God? Remember, in this parable the father had been waiting for him. Can't you just see that dad looking toward the road from time to time wondering if he might see his son coming back! God is passionate about lost people.

The question for us is, are we just as passionate and compassionate toward the lost as God is? If so, how much have we made reaching out to them a priority in our lives and actions?

How do you respond when a lost person is found? Do you celebrate along with God

Lesson 11 – How Do I See Others?

The way we view and treat others has a lot to do with how we view God. **1 John 4:19-20** tells us that our love for others is representative of our love of God. Jesus taught about this often. **Read Luke 10:29-37**

The context of this parable is the answer to a question. *Who asked this question (see 10:25)?*

What question is Jesus answering that we find in verse 29?

Notice, the guy who asked the question “who is my neighbor” was an expert in the Law (10:25). When you are an expert in the law, words matter. If he is going to know who God expects him to love like that then he needs Jesus to define the terms. Was he looking for a loophole? In other words, he can go along with Jesus on the whole love your neighbor thing if Jesus gives a definition of “neighbor” that only includes the “lovable” people in his life.

Why is it important to understand who Jesus thinks we should love?

Summary of the parable

To re-define the way this expert in the Law defines his neighbor Jesus tells a story. He starts with a man that the law expert might have quickly identified as a “neighbor”...a fellow Jew. The man is robbed, beaten, and left for dead. Next, a bunch of guys walk by this law expert would have also easily seen as neighbor types (a priest and a Levite) but they don't stop to help.

Who does stop to help this guy?

How far does the Samaritan go to help?

Why do you think this Samaritan goes to so much trouble to help?

- This Samaritan sees that Jew as a neighbor to be loved

What is Jesus doing here?

Jesus is redefining how this expert in the Law sees people. Here is how he does it. He takes the most holy and righteous people he might know (priest and Levite) and has them not act neighborly. Then Jesus takes the furthest thing a Jew would know to be a neighbor, a Samaritan (who the Jews had hated for several hundreds years at this point) and made him the hero of the story, but what is more...Jesus is saying that guy you think you are supposed to hate was the neighbor here.

So who does Jesus say is our neighbor?

- Jesus is saying, think of that person that you like the least...that is your neighbor
- That means everyone is your neighbor

How does the world like to define who qualifies as “neighbor” that we would then have to love?

Read Matthew 5:43-45

What two things does Jesus tell us to do for our enemies?

What makes someone seem like an “enemy” today?

Application

Do you have any enemies?

How might you begin to see them as your neighbor?

How do you pray for someone like that? What does that prayer sound like?

Lesson 12 – Narrow Gates & Counting the Cost

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus invites people to come and follow him but he warns that the way is narrow. **Read Matthew 7:13-14**

Jesus describes two gates we can enter in life. One is narrow and the other is wide. *What is Jesus describing here?*

What makes the way to life through Christ narrow?

- Once you follow Christ, he places demands on your life because Jesus is Lord (that word means “master”)

What does it mean that the path to destruction is wide?

- It is a popular, well traveled path...but we know what it leads to, destruction

Following Jesus Places Demands on Our Lives

Before you go through the narrow gate that Jesus provides and that takes us to eternal life it is important that you are familiar with another one of Jesus teachings. **Read Luke 14:25-35**

Narrowing down the crowd

There are some strong teachings in here, some of which are a little hard to understand. Does Jesus really call us to love our neighbor but hate our father, mother and even ourselves? First, notice there are large crowds following Jesus. It seems like Jesus is trying to weed out who is serious and who is not...who will be offended and leave and who is serious enough about Jesus to stick around.

If you had heard Jesus say these things would you have been tempted to leave?

What is it about Jesus that would have made you want to continue to follow him, even when he taught tough things like these?

So what is Jesus doing here?

We know Jesus is not teaching hating people are a requirement to be his disciple. Jesus is getting his followers ready for what lies ahead. Jesus is going to go to Jerusalem, suffer, die and raise from the dead. He is going to call his followers to evangelize the whole world and face threats of punishment, torture, stoning, and more...he has to make sure if they are going to follow him that they are willing to go all the way.

You can't half way follow Jesus. That is why he wants to make sure they are ready to carry a cross in 14:27 (die to themselves) before making the commitment to follow him.

Jesus helps us figure out how to count the cost

Jesus gives us two parables that teach us something about counting the cost. *What does Jesus say a tower builder needs to do before starting his work?*

What does that mean for us?

- Before we jump on board we better make sure we can go the distance
- To go the distance is going to cost us something...maybe even everything

Why is it extremely important that if we decide to follow Christ that we are able to do it to the very end of our lives and not come up short?

Next, what does Jesus say a king must do before going to war?

Here is what Jesus is saying, if you are going to follow me, you can't do it halfway. You have to be all in or don't do it at all. There is no fence sitting and there is no way to be half-hearted.

Application

Do you ever struggle with being "all in" for Jesus?

What pulls at you?

How can you know you are carrying a cross, laying down your life, for Jesus?

What signs might you notice that tell you the cross is still sitting on the ground, rather than in your arms?

Prayer - Pray that we will be faithful to the end and that as we make disciples in this world we will equip them to remain faithful not matter what this world throws at them.

Lesson 13 – Jesus is Coming Soon

There is one last major theme in the parables of Jesus. It goes like this “Keep watch...don’t fall asleep”

Read Mark 13:32-36

Jesus is talking about his second coming, the time Jesus will come back to judge the world and to reign with his people forever. *What two things does Jesus tell us to do in 13:33? In that same verse, why does he say that is so important?*

Imagine if you knew exactly what day Jesus was going to return on. Do you think some would be tempted to live a sinful life up to the very end and then repent while they still had time. Jesus is warning us to not live like that because we never know when he may return. Instead, we must keep watch and guard ourselves.

What does it mean for Jesus to return and find his people “sleeping”?

How do you think Satan lulls us to sleep so that we stop keeping watch?

We can talk about the importance of God’s kingdom all day long but at the end of the day, the kingdom is about more than talk. God wants us to be ready for the kingdom. In **Matthew 25:1-13** Jesus gives us another glimpse into why it is so important to be ready for the return of Jesus.

Weddings were a big deal in the ancient world (nothing new, right?). There were a lot of preparations for the ceremony and a great feast that would follow. *What were these ten women given supposed to do?*

Why were five of them called “foolish”?

When someone gives you responsibilities for a wedding day, rule number one is “don’t goof it up because it is a BIG deal”.

What did the five girls without oil do?

What happened while they were gone?

The groom coming for his wedding is Jesus second coming. He has told us he would be back and has asked us to be ready and waiting for his return. *What does it mean to be like the ladies who weren’t ready?*

What do you think the feast represents that happens after the groom arrives?

These women are punished for their un-readiness by not being allowed into the feast. They didn't do what they were told.

So here we are...we are waiting for the bridegroom to arrive for the great wedding feast. It is going to be a time of great joy and blessing. We have been told it is coming and we have been told to be ready. Will we be ready?

Application

What can we do to be ready for Jesus' return?

What should we do if we see someone who doesn't have any oil for their lamp and there is still time to get some?

- This question is aimed at getting us to realize we can help others get ready if they aren't in the right relationship with God

Read 1 Corinthians 9:24

It is important that we are ready for Jesus. It is important that we take his teachings seriously. We must count the cost. We must finish the race. Along the way it is important that we love others and reach out to those who don't know Jesus because that is what life in the kingdom is all about.