

*THE PARABLES OF JESUS*

### *Leader's Notes*

This Bible study series is written with rotating leadership in mind. To this end, each lesson's questions have short explanatory notes with contextual information that help inform the various parables. The questions which follow these explanatory notes are meant to be asked in light of the note. All that is required of the leader is to read through the study beforehand to familiarize himself/herself with the content and the flow of the study.

This study also seeks to draw out the thoughts of discussion participants and invites each participant to respond cerebrally and emotionally. This allows the words of the parable to enter into the life of the participant. While what some participants might "think" about a particular parable may not actually be in line with what Jesus intended, this thinking about the parable is the first step to engagement with it. Here the explanatory notes also steer the thoughts of participants towards the truth.

Each study is divided into three sections: (1) what the text says and means, (2) discipleship implications, and (3) continued reflection and response. The first task in studying Scripture is to understand what it actually says. Its meaning can then be elucidated. Once we understand what Jesus is saying and what he meant by it, implications for contemporary discipleship emerge. Further reflection on the theme represented by each lesson's parable is encouraged through additional Scripture reading, journaling and prayer. Participants are also challenged to take specific steps in response to the teaching of Jesus.

Groups can choose how much of each study needs to be covered during the meeting. For example, the first section – what the text says and means – can be done individually so that the group can reflect together on discipleship implications and encourage prayerful response. Alternatively, an open group which has new participants continually coming can explore what the text says and means and its correlated discipleship implications during the group time. Then participants can go through the reflection and response section individually.

The following introductory section outlines a theological and anthropological framework for the study series. It also outlines what parables are and the function they serve. This material is designed to be taught at the first meeting so that participants have a theological lens through which to view the parables and an understanding of what kind of literature the parables are.

### *Introduction*

***Storied people.*** We are intrinsically storied people; our lives involve characters, scenes, drama, and varying plots. These stories primarily emerge in and through the context of relationships. We have history with people, our lives are currently being influenced by people, and we live with particular relational hopes, for better or for worse. You might say that our stories are essentially complex relational networks. It is no surprise then that the most popular literary work in the history of humanity is a grand story of a people's reliance and interaction with their God. Because we are storied people, we connect with stories and respond to stories, particularly the characters in these stories.

Conversely, as one pastor-theologian-sociologist has said, "information, doctrine and education do not catalyze transformation." The transformational impact of information is often a function of our relationship with the bearer of that information. What those we trust say to us is taken to heart while the words of those we don't respect often go unheard. A list of truth claims, although they may be absolutely true and can be cognitively grasped, does not often lead to human response. It is only in relationship that we are transformed. Jesus understood this and therefore invited us into a relationship with the Father through him. Jesus also understood that we are storied people and therefore taught using stories, which often took the form of parables. What a parable is will be explored below.

***The Shalom Kingdom.*** The grand story which Jesus proclaimed using mini stories (often parables) was one of the Kingdom of God. Jesus' first sermon was a proclamation of the Kingdom (Mk 1:14-15), a Shalom Kingdom which he inaugurated with his coming when Caesar Augustus ruled the Roman Empire, Herod was King in Judea and Quirinius was governor of Syria (Mt 2:1, Lk 2:1-2). Shalom is the Biblical word for complete peace, a peace which is not merely the absence of injustice and suffering, but also the presence of complete wholeness. In the Biblical narrative, Shalom was

experienced for a brief moment when Adam and Eve shared life in the garden before they began to doubt the Father's care for them. Jesus invites us to participate in his expanding Kingdom by (1) repenting from our anti-Shalom ways, (2) placing our hope in Jesus, who is currently expanding, through the work of Holy Spirit, his Shalom Kingdom, and (3) responding to the Shalom Kingdom imperative, namely cooperating with the Holy Spirit's work of justice, peace, and wholeness. Participating in Jesus' Shalom Kingdom changes us from small narcissistic storied people to people caught up in a grand story, which began with creation, is currently unfolding in our world, and will be completed when Jesus finally returns to perfect all of creation.

**Parables.** Parables were Jesus' favorite form of teaching about the Shalom Kingdom. There are thirty stories told by Jesus in which he refers to them specifically as parables. In addition, there are seventeen more stories, not explicitly labeled by Jesus as parables, but which clearly are. To this can be added nearly thirty sayings of Jesus which might be considered parables. Jesus loved to tell stories!

Since parables constitute so much of Jesus' teaching, it is imperative that we properly understand what a parable is. The word "parable" is a transliteration of the Greek word "*parabole*" (παράβολή). Therefore, in order to properly understand what a parable is, we must not consult a modern English dictionary, but an ancient Greek dictionary. Additionally, we must ask how Jesus' first language, Aramaic, and his Jewish cultural context related to the marketplace language, Greek, and its corresponding Greco-Roman culture. Two Greek dictionaries define *parabole* as follows:

A parable is a short discourse that makes a comparison; it often expresses a (single) complete thought (*BADG*).

The NT parable is more than a mere metaphor... or simile... It is an independent similitude in which an evident or accepted truth from a known field (nature, human life) is designed to establish or illustrate a new truth in the preaching of Jesus (kingdom of God, God's nature and action, piety) (*TDNT*).

A *parabole*, then, in its traditional Greek usage, involves some kind of comparison, although not simply a mere metaphor. Although Jesus likely could speak and understand Greek (he conversed with Greeks, Mk. 7:24-30), his first language was Aramaic (he uses Aramaic words in Mk 5:41, 14:36, 15:34) and he grew up in a Jewish family. Therefore, we must search for the meaning of *parabole* in a Jewish context, particularly in the Jewish (Hebrew) Scriptures, what Christians call the Old Testament. The Hebrew Scriptures used the term "*mashal*" (מָשָׁל) when speaking of parables. This term was used to refer to similitude, proverb and some forms of prophesy. An example of *mashal* used in prophesy is that found in Isaiah 5 of the vineyard. What is significant about *mashal* in the Hebrew Scriptures is that it is not merely an extended comparison but a complete story in itself so that the truth of the *mashal* is often hidden from the hearer. "In hidden parabolic speech, which provokes reflection, the prophets convey to dull hearers the divine summons which seek to awaken their conscience or religious perception" (*TDNT* Vol. 5, Page 748).

Thus, a parable (Gk. = *parabole*, Hb. = *mashal*), as Jesus likely understood it, is a (usually complete) story which used comparison to illustrate something which was true but often remained hidden. Given this Coptic nature then, interpretation can be challenging. Allegorical interpretation, where every aspect of the parable was set against a corresponding aspect of reality, was popular for many centuries. For example, Augustine, arguably the most influential theologian for the first 1500 years of the Church, applied the following comparisons in the parable of the Good Samaritan: man going down to Jericho = Adam, Jerusalem = City of Heavenly Peace, Jericho = moon, robbers = devil, priest = Priesthood of the OT, Levite = Prophecies of the OT, Good Samaritan = Jesus, Beast = Body of Christ, Inn = Church, two denarii = two love commandments, innkeeper = Apostle Paul, return of Good Samaritan = Jesus' resurrection. Clearly, this process of interpretation often focused on the microscopic details of the story and involved connections which are highly speculative.

Modern scholarship has offered a corrective by suggesting that parables often communicate a single point or lesson, represented by the main point of comparison, e.g. the Good Samaritan compared to the self righteous religious leader. However, we must not confine parables in a straightjacket of conformity to this single-meaning structure. For example, the parable of the four soils clearly has several points of comparison (the sower, the four soils). Additionally, Jesus was not a philosopher who simply outlined spiritual truths, which can be summarized in bullet point form. He was, among other things, a first century Jewish preacher, preaching the Kingdom of God in parables. Therefore, the main point of comparison must be “sought in its living context within the theme of Jesus’ preaching” (*TDNT*, Vol. 5, Page 753). An appropriate question to ask of Jesus’ parables is thus, “What is the main point of this parable, in light of the remainder of Jesus’ teaching?”

***Philosophy of Education.*** In light of what has been said above, the philosophy of education upon which this study series is built is one which assumes:

- (1) We are storied people and therefore learn and respond best to stories.
- (2) This response, what I will call transformation, is the goal of Christian education.
- (3) Christian education fails when it results in nothing more than cognitive development.
- (4) Real transformation happens best in the context of relationship.
- (5) Being transformed in the context of relationship is essentially an experiential process. In other words, we don’t talk about relationship; we live it.

This study series has therefore been designed as follows:

- (1) The parables (stories) of Jesus are the guiding content of each lesson.
- (2) A small group (relational) context is assumed where discussion and accountability can take place.
- (3) Each lesson seeks to discover what the text says and what it means in order that the implications for discipleship might emerge.
- (4) The study invites participants to continue to think through the implications and to take concrete action in response to each study.

### *The Lost Sheep, Coin and Son*

Study #1 in *The Parables of Jesus*

Luke 15:1-24

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#### *What does the text say and mean?*

Read Luke 15:1-2.

*Toll collectors.* The Greek word that is most often translated “tax collectors” is *telonai*. However, in the Greco-Roman world, tax collectors were known as *demosiones*. These *demosiones* were directly employed by the Roman government to collect the Roman taxes. There were additional “indirect taxes” (tolls, tariffs, imposts, customs, etc) which were most often auctioned off to the highest bidder who then became the chief toll collector, (Gk. = *architelones*) and employed agents (Gk. = *telonai*), the people referred to by Luke in 15:1. The *architelones* usually had to pay the expected revenue to the Romans in advance, and they would then try to recover their expenses, plus profit, by employing *telonai* to collect tolls. This resulted in widespread abuse among the *telonai*.

*Table fellowship.* In the Ancient Near Eastern world, sharing a meal together carried much more significance than it does today. To eat with someone signified acceptance of that person. As a result, an upright Pharisee would not dine with even a common Jew because the Pharisee could not be sure that the food was prepared according to strict kosher guidelines or that it had been properly tithed.

- ◆ Given this context, what is the nature of the Pharisees’ and Scribes’ complaint against Jesus?
- ◆ Immediately before this parable, Jesus spoke of the cost of being a disciple, particularly the call to “give up everything” (14:33) and concludes his tough words by saying, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (14:34b). Read 15:1-2 again. How do the toll collectors and sinners respond to Jesus’ words on the cost of discipleship? How do the Pharisees and Scribes respond? What does this tell you about the attitude of each toward Jesus?

Read Luke 15:3-7

- ◆ Contrast the attitude of the Pharisees and Scribes toward what is lost (15:2) with that of the shepherd (15:5-7).
- ◆ Jesus interprets his own story in v. 7. What is Jesus’ emphasis in this parable?

Read Luke 15:8-10

- ◆ What does the woman do when she discovers she has lost a silver coin?
- ◆ What does she do when she finds it?

Read Luke 15:11-32

- ◆ Give this story a short title which best describes it.

*Inheritance.* Inheritances were generally distributed to sons after a father’s death. In rare cases when a son’s inheritance was granted before his father’s death, the father continued to maintain control over the property. For example, the right to sell it would not be given until the father’s death. It is clear in Jesus’ parable that the younger son was requesting the right to dispose of the inheritance since that is in fact what he did (15:13).

- ◆ A son's request for an early inheritance would have likely evoked a beating from his father. Why?
- ◆ What is the son implicitly saying by such a request?
- ◆ Even if you knew nothing of the cultural context in which this request takes place, how might you expect the father to have responded to the request? What then is surprising about the father's response?

*The younger son's destitution.* There are many foods which Jews do not eat because they are ceremonially unclean. Among them is pork because pigs do not chew their cud (Lev 11:7, Deut 14:8). No respectable Jew, therefore, would have been a swineherd. That the younger son engages in pig farming signifies his absolute destitution. Jesus' parable understates the son's situation, "began to be in need." He is without family, money, food and in a distant land which was suffering a famine.

- ◆ When the younger son is in his darkest hour, he "comes to his senses." What does this involve?
- ◆ What does the younger son decide to say to his father?
- ◆ Suppose you are in the younger son's shoes. What would you be thinking on your journey back to your father? What fears and hopes would you have?
- ◆ What does the son actually say to the father? How is this different from what he rehearsed? Keep this in mind as we move on.

*Honor in the Ancient Near East.* Contemporary North Americans place emphasis upon one's perception of self (self esteem) irregardless of what others might think (individualism). By contrast, people in the Ancient Near Eastern world made decisions based on how they would bring honor, in the eyes of others, to oneself and one's family. Honor was a form of currency, a sort of "credit rating" in the eyes of others. Aristotle said that "honor is the greatest of external goods." Conversely, shame was marked by the loss of public honor. Both honor and shame were ascribed to entire families. What brought honor to one member of the family brought honor to the whole family, and likewise with shame. In fact, scholars agree that Ancient Near Eastern society was essentially honor/shame based.

- ◆ In light of Ancient Near Eastern honor/shame based society, how might you expect the father to have responded to his younger son's return?
- ◆ How does the father respond to his younger son's return? Why is this surprising?
- ◆ Before the younger son is able to complete his rehearsed speech, his father interrupts him with some surprising words and gestures. What was the younger son hoping for upon his return home? What did he receive?
- ◆ What do the active characters in Jesus' three parables (the shepherd, the woman, the father) share in common?

#### ***What are the implications for discipleship?***

- ◆ What is the one main point for each of these parables?
- ◆ Based on these parables, summarize what you think Jesus' attitude toward outcasts is.
- ◆ What is Jesus trying to tell the Pharisees and Scribes through these parables?
- ◆ What is Jesus trying to tell those whom society rejects through these parables?
- ◆ What is Jesus trying to say to you through these parables?
- ◆ What are the implications for the Church?

#### ***Continuing reflection and response***

- ◆ Isaiah 40:11 reads: *He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.* Are you allowing Jesus to carry you? Are you allowing him to get close to your heart, to see it, to heal it, to change it? If not, what is preventing you from allowing him to carry you?

- ◆ Read Luke 5:29-32. One of the major challenges for Christians is to not narrow their relational network to like-minded people, namely only Christians. Jesus knew of no such thing. Are you interacting with the same sort people Jesus cared about so much? If not, how can you enter the context of those who do not yet know the Gospel? Pray that God would show you how or who to “eat with.”
- ◆ Luke 19:10 summarizes the parables of the lost sheep, coin and son: “*The Son of Man has come to seek out and to save what was lost.*” Who do you know who is “lost”? How do you imagine Jesus might interact with that person? You are not Jesus, but how might you be His agent? Pray for this person and pray how God might be calling you to respond.

***The Treasure and the Pearl***  
 Study #2 in *The Parables of Jesus*  
 Matthew 13:44-46

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***What does the text say and mean?***

Read Matthew, 14:44-46.

*Pearls*: were generally imported from India and were a luxurious item given their value in that day, akin to gold. They were so valuable they became a figure of speech for something of supreme worth. In Jewish language, pearl referred to something that was priceless, like the Torah, Israel, of an important thought, or God's abundant reward for the pious.

- ◆ What motivated the man in the field and the merchant? Do you think they experienced this as a sacrificial act? Why or why not?
- ◆ Dale Bruner, in his commentary on Matthew, says "Joy *enables* selling, but only selling *gets* the treasure; selling is a condition not for *finding*, but it is a condition for *having* the treasure." Explain what Bruner is saying. What does the Gospel offer us? What does it ask of us?
- ◆ Mt 13:22, in the context of the parable of the sower, states that the cares of the world and the deceit of riches choke the Word. How? Why?

Read Philippians 3:8-10.

- ◆ What was Paul's perspective on the treasure that is the Kingdom of God?
- ◆ In what ways do you share Paul's perspective? and/or differ from it?
- ◆ Explain how neither the Protestant church, emphasizing the joy of the discovery, nor the Catholic Church, emphasizing the selling of all, has done justice to the entire message of the Gospel.

***What are the implications for discipleship?***

- ◆ What is the one main point of the parable?
- ◆ Why is the thought of "selling everything" so difficult for us to stomach? How does the joy of the discovery put that into perspective?
- ◆ Where do you fall on the Catholic-Protestant spectrum introduced above? Which side of the spectrum is most difficult for you to embrace? Why?
- ◆ Let us consider that these are not instructions to put all of our possessions (house, car, computer, clothes, bike, etc.) up for sale on EBay. What ARE the implications of this teaching?

***Continuing reflection and response***

- ◆ The treasure and pearl parables are clearly about the sacrifice of entering the Kingdom. What sacrifices have you made because of the Kingdom? What still remains to be given up?
- ◆ Read Matthew 18:18-30. The rich young ruler turned away from "treasure in heaven" because Jesus asked him to forsake his great wealth in order to follow him. The sacrifice was too great in the rich ruler's eyes. Jesus didn't ask him to sell everything because one must be poor to follow Jesus; he asked him to sell everything because he knew the rich ruler put his hope in those possessions. Is there something you are holding on to (money, relationships, status, power, etc.) that would represent too much of a sacrifice if Jesus were to call you to give it up? What is it?

## ***The Parable of the Good Shepherd and the Gate***

*Study #3 in The Parables of Jesus*

*John 10:1-18*

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### ***What does the text say and mean?***

Read John 10:1-6

- ◆ Describe everything the text says about the shepherd and his role in as much detail as possible.
- ◆ Describe the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep from both the perspectives of the shepherd and the sheep.
- ◆ Describe everything the text says about the man who enters by some way other than the gate (10:1).

*The Feast of Dedication.* Jesus told this parable during the Jewish *Feast of Dedication*, or *Hanukkah* (John 10:22). The *Feast of Dedication* was a celebration of when Judas Maccabeus regained control of the Jewish Temple for the Jews and rededicated it to Yahweh in 165 B.C. For since Alexander the Great's conquest of Palestine in 332 B.C., Greek influence had led to desecration of the Temple and the leading astray of many Jews. The *Feast of Dedication*, therefore, celebrated the rededication of the Temple, but also reflected on how Jewish leadership allowed the Greeks to have so great an influence on Jewish life. Where were the religious "shepherds" of Israel (the Temple leadership) when the Greeks were taking over? What must "shepherds" do now to prevent this from happening again? These were the questions in the minds of Jews during the Feast of Dedication.

Read John 10:7-18

- ◆ A typical text that would have been read in the synagogues during the *Feast* would have been Ezekiel 34. Read Ezekiel 34:1-17. In light of this and the context of the *Feast*, how do you think Jesus' parable was received?
- ◆ Immediately prior to this parable, some Pharisees were angry with Jesus because he healed a blind man on the Sabbath (9:14, 16) and proceeded to imply that these Pharisees were spiritually blind (9:39-41). When Jesus tells the parable of the Good Shepherd and the Gate, he is still speaking to these Pharisees. What is he saying to them?
- ◆ In light of the shepherd language in the Hebrew Scriptures, what was Jesus claiming for himself when he said he was The Good Shepherd? Why was this audacious and absurd to his audience?

*Sheep and shepherds in ancient Israel.* Shepherding, along with agriculture, was a primary means of survival in ancient Palestine. Because of the arid climate in Palestine, shepherds were required to travel long distances with their sheep in search of food for grazing. This often meant long periods of time away from home and sleeping out of doors. Given the isolated nature of this job, a shepherd's sheep were constantly in danger of theft and being attacked by wild animals. Because sheep provided food and clothing for his family, they were tremendously valuable to him. Therefore, he exercised great care in protecting and providing for them. The term "shepherd" was used in the Babylonian and Assyrian worlds (adjacent to Palestine) of kings and rulers who gathered the dispersed, exercised righteous government and cared for the weak. The Hebrew Scriptures likewise attribute the portrait of shepherd to Yahweh who goes before His flock (Ps 68:7), who guides it (Ps 23:3), who leads it to pastures (Jer 50:19) and to places where it may rest by the waters (Is. 40:11, 49:10; Ps. 23:2, 80:1), who protects it with His staff (Ps 23:4), who whistles (Judges 5:16) to the dispersed and gathers them (Is 56:8), who carries the lambs in His bosom and leads the mother-sheep (Is. 40:11).

*Sheep pens.* Sheep pens were used by shepherds to protect their sheep at night from thieves and wild animals. Shepherds would guide their sheep into a fenced area, often using the landscape as part of the

fence (a cliff or at the end of a deep canyon). There was only one entrance to the sheep pen, and either thorn bushes or the shepherd himself acted as the gate. This is why Jesus could refer to himself as both the gate and the shepherd.

- ◆ Contrast the image of the Good Shepherd with that of the man who enters by some way other than the gate, which you described above.
- ◆ Describe everything the text says about the man who has been hired to watch the sheep (10:12).
- ◆ Contrast the image of the Good Shepherd with that of the hired hand. What motivates the hired hand to act as he does? What motivates the Good Shepherd to act as he does?

Read John 10:14-18 again

- ◆ Jesus compares the relationship between the Good Shepherd and the sheep with the relationship between himself and his Father. How does this inform the Good Shepherd's relationship with the sheep?

***What are the implications for discipleship?***

- ◆ What is the one main point of this parable?
- ◆ In 10:9, Jesus describes the sheep as coming in and going out, freely and safely grazing and unworried about the threatening world around them. Why is it that it's so difficult for us to know this same kind of safety that Jesus offers us? How might you cultivate your faith such that it reflects a trust in Jesus as the Good Shepherd?
- ◆ Jesus emphasizes that the sheep know their shepherd's voice. And in 10:14, Jesus says that his sheep know him as well as he knows his Father. Do you hear God? How? When are you more attuned to Jesus' voice? How might you learn to hear? How does this challenge the nature of your relationship with the living Jesus?

***Continuing reflection and response***

- ◆ Read Psalm 23 several times. David wrote these words because he believed they were true of the Shepherd. Can you claim such faith for yourself? Do you believe this Psalm? Why or why not?
- ◆ Read Psalm 139. Reread vv. 13-16. Journal your response to these words using "I" language, i.e. "I think", "I feel", "I hope", "I will."
- ◆ How can you adopt the ways of the Good Shepherd with your family? In the marketplace? In your church?

***The Parable of the New and Old Wineskins***  
*Study #4 in The Parables of Jesus*  
*Luke 5:36-39, Matthew 9:16-17 & Mark 2:21-22*

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***What does the text say and mean?***

Read Luke 5:27-39.

- ◆ What is the first complaint brought against Jesus by the Pharisees and teachers of the law?
- ◆ How does Jesus respond to this accusation?
- ◆ Where do the Pharisees and teachers of the law steer the conversation to next? Why do you think they do this?
- ◆ What is it about the old wineskins that cause them to burst?
- ◆ What is it about the wine that causes the old wineskins to burst?
- ◆ Why is it about new wineskins that prevent them from bursting and spoiling the wine?

*Wineskins and fermenting wine.* Wineskins were made out of animal hide, sewn into jug-like containers. The nature of these leather containers was such that they were initially quite supple, allowing for expansion. They were therefore perfect for wine, which when it fermented, expanded. Wineskins had a limited life, because after some time, they would become brittle, no longer able to expand with fermenting wine.

- ◆ How is Jesus similar to fermenting wine?
- ◆ How are the Pharisees similar to old wineskins?

*Fasting in ancient Jewish religion.* Fasting was no mere peripheral activity for Jews. It was a central practice for the faithful (Lev 16:29-34, 23:26-32, Num 29:7-11). Fasting was usually practiced in concert with prayer because by fasting, Jews hoped, for example, that God would deliver them (2 Sam 12:16-20) or that calamity would be avoided (Jdg 20:26). National fasts were declared on the Day of Atonement and the memorial of Jerusalem's fall. Zealous Jews even fasted twice a week on a regular basis. The Pharisees' complaint, then, was not about silly religious formalities; it was about the most common means by which Jews hoped to gain an audience with Yahweh.

- ◆ What then is Jesus suggesting about the Israelite religious practices in his parables of the wineskins and clothe?
- ◆ Read Col 2:16-23. What does Paul say about religiosity? Why does he warn against it?

***What are the implications for discipleship?***

- ◆ What is the main point of this parable?
- ◆ What does a brittle Christian look like?
- ◆ What does a supple Christian look like?
- ◆ In what ways do you try to "control" God? Why is God "uncontrollable"?
- ◆ We are creatures of cycle, habit, repetition, familiarity and safety. How does Jesus Christ challenge each of those?

***Continuing reflection and response***

- ◆ Read 2 Cor 5:17. What in you has been declared dead in your new birth with Christ but which you are still trying to keep alive? What in your life is the fruit of a new life in Christ? You might want to use Gal 5:22-26 to help you identify such fruit.
- ◆ Read John 3:1-21. What does Jesus mean when he says Nicodemus must be "born from above"?

***The Parable of the Talents***  
***Study #5 in The Parables of Jesus***  
***Matthew 25:14-30***

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***What does the text say and mean?***

Read Mt. 25:14-30

- ◆ One talent was worth about 15 years wages for a day laborer. The amount of money being lent in this parable is significant. Today, at \$100/day, one talent is equivalent to approximately \$375,000. Lest we get caught up in figuring out precisely how much money is represented here, the point is that it was A LOT! What does this say about the master's character? His relationship with his servants?
- ◆ What do the servants who are given five and two talents do with this enormous sum of money?
- ◆ What does the servant who is given one talent do with this money?
- ◆ What motivates the decisions of the one-talent servant?
- ◆ What do you think motivates the decisions of the five- and two-talent servants?
- ◆ How does the master respond to the five- and two-talent servants? Why?
- ◆ How does the master respond to the one-talent servant? Why?
- ◆ What do the actions of each servant reveal about their fundamental understanding of the master?

*“Taken away” part I.* Matthew 25:29, “For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him,” is a difficult saying. This would have been understood by Jesus' audience because it was similar to traditional Jewish thought (the context in which Jesus told this parable) on the giving of the Law, or the Torah (first 5 books of the Bible). The Torah was given and taught freely. Students were urged to take advantage of this gift by learning as much as possible, because the one who learns more “has more.” Conversely, the one who fails to learn, in essence, loses the gift of the Torah since he or she fails to understand it.

- ◆ What is the gift that Jesus offers? What, then, is Jesus saying the one-talent servant has lost?

*“Taken away” part II.* Is it fair that the one who had the least would be stripped of the little he had? Many people react strongly against the master taking back from the one who had the least. But lest the reader be misguided, remember that the one who had the least possessed approximately 15 years wages in his one talent. This parable is not about making the rich richer and the poor poorer. Even so, Dale Bruner answers the question that opened this paragraph, “Yes, for it is unfair for even the minimally gifted to live their whole lives focused on their own security” (*Churchbook*, 562).

- ◆ Do you agree with Bruner's assessment of the fairness of the master? Why or why not?

***What are the implications for discipleship?***

- ◆ What is the main point of this parable?
- ◆ Summarize what you think Jesus' understanding of “intentions” and “actions” are based on this story he tells.

*Talents.* “Talents have been variously described in interpretation, but the literal meaning of a talent is money. And each disciple has, in fact, been entrusted with a certain amount of *money*. . . . A talent may also be thought of as time, though all disciples receive an equal amount of this. . . . More fruitful is the idea that a talent is any *opportunity* at all, each day, and this would include many realities: work, family, play, community, and even interruptions. Finally, talent has passed over into English usage as a name for a personal aptitude, and this, too, can be a valuable way to discover one's responsibility before God.

Whatever a talent is.... it is whatever the Lord gives now and will ask about later.” (Bruner, *The Churchbook*, 554)

- ♦ What gifts, skills, resources and passions has God given you? How are you investing them?

*Preparedness.* This parable begins with the word “Again” (Gk. = *hosper gar* = “for just as”) and therefore connects it with the preceding parable of the ten virgins and Jesus’ teaching on the end of the ages, all of which emphasizes preparedness for Jesus’ second coming. We must then interpret the parable of the talents in light of this theme of preparedness. In the parable, we learn that after “receiving” the talents, the five- and two-talent servants “went out at once”, “put his money to work”, and “gained five more.”

- ♦ What, then, does Christian preparedness look like?

*The Miser.* There are similarities between the parable of the talents and Aesop’s fable of “The Miser”: “A miser sold all his property and bought a mass of gold, which he buried in a secret place to which he made frequent visits of inspection. Someone who had noticed his coming and going found the treasure and carried it off, and when the miser returned and discovered his loss he wailed and tore his hair in a frenzy of grief. Someone who saw him agonizing, after learning the cause, said to him, “Don’t grieve, my friend, just take a stone and bury it in the same place and think of it as gold in a vault. Even when the gold was there you made no use of it.” (quoted in Young, *The Parables*, 92)

- ♦ The miser lost everything in this story, but unfortunately, he never really had anything to begin since he never put it to use. His situation after his loss was really no different than before his gold was stolen. Is there something precious in your life which you have buried? What prevents you from unearthing it?
- ♦ The one-talent servant exercises a good deal of precaution in the parable. Precaution is often counted among the virtues of wisdom. But the one-talent servant is excessively precautionous. Jesus tells him the precautionous thing to do would have been to invest the one talent with the banks in order to at least earn interest. What is Jesus demonstrating in this parable with regard to fear? Precaution? Risk? How does this inform your discipleship?

### *Continuing reflection and response*

- ♦ What are your skills and/or spiritual gifts? List as many as you can think of. Don’t worry about deciphering which is a skill and which is a spiritual gift; those boundaries are blurry and often not very helpful.
- ♦ What are you passionate about? List all the things you can think of.
- ♦ What unique experiences have you had, both positive and negative (E.g. grew up on a farm, traveled across the globe with your soccer team, child of alcoholic parents, you were the youngest child, etc.). List as many as you can think of.
- ♦ What is it that Jesus called his followers to do?
- ♦ God does not make mistakes when he grants passions. Nor does he accidentally make us to be uniquely good at certain things. And while many of our past experiences have been painful, God does not “write them off.” Each of these things – your passions, skills and experiences – may in fact be helpful signposts toward where God is calling you. How do your passions, skills and experiences inform what God might be calling you to do? Another way to say this is, How is God calling you to invest your “talents”?

***The Parable of the Tenants******Study #6 in The Parables of Jesus***

*Matthew 21:33-44, Mark 12:1-11 & Luke 20:9-18*

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***What does the text say and mean?***

- ◆ Who is the landlord? The vineyard? The tenants? The servants? The son? Describe each of these people and the roles they play in this parable.
- ◆ What are some major themes in this parable?
- ◆ In his discussion of this parable in *Knowing God*, Lloyd John Ogilvie titles that section, “*God’s Love Knows No Limit.*” How does this parable illustrate that?
- ◆ Describe the character of the landlord.
- ◆ How would you describe the tenants?
- ◆ Why did the tenants kill the servants? The son? Get into their heads; what were they thinking? What were they after?
- ◆ What is Jesus’ response to those who do not produce fruit for the kingdom?

***What are the implications for discipleship?***

- ◆ What is the main point of this parable?
- ◆ Why do you think Jesus taught it?
- ◆ How do you think you would have responded to the servants if you had worked so hard that entire season only to give 1/3 of it away to the owner?
- ◆ How does this parable challenge you?

***Continued reflection and response***

***The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant***

*Study #7 in The Parables of Jesus*

*Matthew 18:21-34*

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What are some barriers to forgiving another person?

Read Mt. 18:21-34.

***What does the text say and mean?***

- ◆ Why did Peter approach Jesus with this question? (see v15-20)
- ◆ This servant knew he couldn't pay back his debt because it was about 37,500,000 days worth of wages (~\$3.75 billion at \$100/day). Why did he promise the king he'd pay given more time?
- ◆ How does this parable demonstrate how God employs both divine mercy and divine judgment?
- ◆ Why do you think the servant was unable to forgive?
- ◆ Perhaps the servant's problem was that he was unable to accept the forgiveness offered him by the king. Why do you think that was a roadblock for his ability to forgive others?
- ◆ What does this parable say about the reality of consequences for our sin?

***What are the implications for discipleship?***

- ◆ What is the main point of this parable?
- ◆ Forgiveness isn't a radical concept now and wasn't in Jesus' time. What is radical about this parable?
- ◆ How would you reword the servant's plea, filling it with more truth and humility?
- ◆ In light of this parable, how real to you is your indebtedness to God?
- ◆ What does this parable tell us about the nature of our debt? How can we get out of debt?
- ◆ How do you respond to a God of mercy? Of judgment?
- ◆ How is it that we can be forgiven but still suffer consequences? Is that real forgiveness? Explain.
- ◆ The unmerciful servant's debt was 375,000 times larger than the debt of his fellow servant's. The truth is that whatever sins somebody commits against me, they are magnitudes less offensive than the sins I commit against God. How does this truth help you to extend forgiveness?
- ◆ Why is it so hard to forgive? What is it about human nature that makes this process difficult?

***Continuing reflection and response***

- ◆ Take a few moments and write out the names of people you need to forgive and those from whom you need to seek forgiveness. Lift these up to God and prayerfully consider doing it.

***The Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector***

*Study #8 in The Parables of Jesus*

*Luke 18:9-14*

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***What does the text say and mean?***

- ◆ The Pharisee addresses God, but to what extent does God have his attention? Explain. Who does have his attention?
- ◆ Compare the Pharisees' perceived need for God and the tax collector's perceived need for God. How did this inform their prayers?
- ◆ What do you learn about the Pharisee and the tax collector based on their physical posture?
- ◆ Where has the Pharisee gone wrong? How do you suppose he came to think this way? What went wrong?
- ◆ Read Luke 15:25-30. Compare and contrast the brothers' relationship to the relationship between the Pharisee and the tax collector. Do you identify more with the older brother or the younger brother? In what ways?

***What are the implications for discipleship?***

- ◆ What is the main point of this parable?
- ◆ What are the dangers around you that could lead you to become like the Pharisee? How can you avoid them?
- ◆ What happens when you compare yourself to others you look down on? What about those you look up to?
- ◆ In what ways does this parable challenge your prayer life?

***Continuing reflection and response***

***The Parable of the Two Sons***

*Study #9 in The Parables of Jesus*

*Matthew 21:28-32*

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- ◆ Why do you think God created the world the way he did - a world where we need to make choices, a world with a real measure of freedom?

***What does the text say and mean?***

- ◆ What does the father ask his sons to do?
- ◆ What does the first say and what does he do?
- ◆ What does the second son say and what does he do?
- ◆ Name everything that is good about what the first son does.
- ◆ Name everything that is good about what the second son does.
- ◆ Describe the level of trust that exists between the first son and his father? Describe the level of trust that exists between the second son and his father?
- ◆ Who is Jesus speaking to in this parable? Jesus begins this parable with a question, “What do you think?” What in essence is the question Jesus asks his audience?

***What are the implications for discipleship?***

- ◆ Why is the freedom each son has to choose obedience or not a good thing?
- ◆ What does our freedom to choose tell you about the heart of God?
- ◆ What makes it difficult for you and me to choose to work where our Father wants us to work?

***Continuing reflection and response***

***The Parable of the Ten Virgins***  
***Study #10 in The Parables of Jesus***  
***Matthew 25:1-13***

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***What does the text say and mean?***

- ◆ What do the 10 have in common? How are they different?
- ◆ What made the 5 wise virgins wise? What made the 5 foolish virgins foolish?  
Read the parable of the wedding banquet (Mt. 22:1-14). How are the 5 foolish virgins and the man who went to the banquet without his wedding clothes similar?
- ◆ According to this parable, what constitutes wisdom in relation to Christ's return?

***What are the implications for discipleship?***

- ◆ What is the main point of this parable?
- ◆ This parable is clearly a challenge to be prepared for the coming of Christ. What do you think those preparations should look like in your own life?
- ◆ Is it enough to hear the gospel? To get the invitation? What is required of you?

***Continuing reflection and response***

## NOTES FOR LOST PARABLES

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### SHEEP

19:10 – “The Son of Man has come to seek out and to save what was lost.” This summarizes ch 15. Parables also defends Jesus conduct of reaching out to outcast.

5:29-32 – come to call sinners

Ch 15 is distinctly Lukan – heart of his gospel

Luke 7:34 – J is friend of outcasts

CH 15 explains why J is so quick to invite outcasts to banquet in 14:15-24.

“table fellowship” – this represented in the ancient world acceptance, so that eating w/ sinners would implicitly communicate acceptance of them. Pharisees would never eat at sinner’s homes, or even the homes of lesser Israelites because Pharisees could not be sure that the food would have been properly prepared according to kosher standards or that it had been properly tithed. This demonstrates how the law was emphasized over and above relationship. The law had become a means of exclusion.

Toll-collectors (*telonai*) – this is usually translated tax-collectors, but that’s not right. Tax collectors (*demosiones*) were directly employed by the Roman gov’t and took up the direct taxes of the Roman Empire. Then the indirect taxes (tolls, ktariffs, imposts, customs) were auctioned off to the highest bidder, who became the chief toll collector (*architelones*) who had agents (*telonai*). The architelones usually had to pay the expected revenue to the Romans in advance and they would then try to recoup their expenses plus profit through collecting of tolls. Toll collecting was obviously open to abuse (Anchor Bible, Luke, 470). Toll collectors were thus hated b/c of their crooked ways.

Immediately before (14:35) J says “he who has ears to hear, let him hear” which is followed by “toll collectors and sinners drew near to Jesus to hear him. This was the only group of people who were interested in hearing what Jesus had to say b/c they recognized he represented hope of restoration for them. J offers hope for the outcast, and unfortunately those who are “in” can’t recognize this.

19:7, Zacheus was a chief toll collector and repented of his sin, and gave back to who he stole from. This is response to Jesus teaching in 15?

What of the 99 who are left behind? Shepherd generally counted their sheep at night when they put them up. If this is a typical situation, the shepherd would have left the sheep with a guard or in pen. The point of the parable is that the lost sheep receives special attention over those that are safe and sound.

Contrast the grumbling of the Pharisees and Scribes with the joy of the shepherd/Jesus. 15:5,6,7 → joyfully, rejoicing, joy.

### COINS

More detailed description of the woman’s search than in shepherd’s search. Emphasis is on the great care that goes into searching. Emphasis in sheep was on the value of the lost sheep and the rejoicing over its discovery.

“evangelism is grounded in the joy of recovery” (BECNT 1305)

We learn of God’s character – his concern for outcast and joy at their repentance. But also learn of appropriate attitudes/actions of disciples.

Jesus response to Pharisee criticism is a question formulated in the form of these parables: If a human being will expend such energy to recover her property, how much more will God himself expend over his lost property?

Ten silver coins is not a large sum of money, perhaps 10 days' wages at most. But loss of one coin would be major loss for poor woman. Losing sinners is a major loss to God.

#### FATHER

Central figure is clearly the father, "there was once a man who had two sons..."

That the son asks for his inheritance, he is essentially saying he wished his Father was dead, since inheritances were generally distributed after a father's death

That the Father lets the son go is a picture of God's gracious recognition of our freedom.

That the son takes a job herding pigs demonstrates how desperate he was. This would have been the worst possible job for a Jew, since pigs were unclean.

Upon son's return, he is not allowed to complete his practiced rhetoric. His father interrupts him so that he cannot say, "make me like one of your hired men." Father will do no such thing for this valued son who has been found. Therefore, there is now no condemnation.

V 17, "having come to himself" ie his senses → he thinking up to this point has been crazy.

Ring – (daktylios) may contain a seal and represent the son's membership in the family (BADG 170)

#### NOTES ON TREASURE, PEARL

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Joy of the Gospel – these business men did not make sacrifices. They gained a ton out of the deal (Bruner)

These parables demonstrate the costliness of the Kingdom (Albright and Mann, Anchor Bible Mt). The claims of the Kingdom are absolute for J and disciples. It costs EVERYTHING.

*Pearls*: were generally imported from India and were a luxurious item given their value in that day, akin to gold. They were so valuable they became a figure of speech for something of supreme worth (TDNT 3135). In Jewish language, pearl referred to something that was priceless, like the Torah, Israel, of an important thought, or God's abundant reward for the pious (Luz in *Hermenia* Mt 278).

Mt 13:22, the parable of the sower, states that the care of the world and the deceit of riches choke the word. Here we see that the merchant and the farmer had to sell everything in order to obtain the treasure. The implication is clear: One must give up all else in order to fully embrace the Kingdom.

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