



"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." John 1:4

Parables

LEADERS GUIDE

A man told each of his two sons to go and work in the vineyard. The first told his father no, but then changed his mind and worked anyway. The second told his father he would go but never did. Jesus then asks, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" (Matthew 21:31). The Pharisees answer that the first son did. Jesus simply responds, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him" (vv. 31–32).

The Parable of the Two Sons

by Leslie Benson © CPH



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3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63118-3968
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Cover art: *The Parable of the Two Sons*, Leslie Benson/© Concordia Publishing House

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Manufactured in the United States of America

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Introduction

Welcome to LifeLight

A special pleasure is in store for you. You will be instrumental in leading your brothers and sisters in Christ closer to Him who is our life and light (John 1:4). You will have the pleasure of seeing fellow Christians discover new insights and rediscover old ones as they open the Scriptures and dig deep into them, perhaps deeper than they have ever dug before. More than that, you will have the pleasure of sharing in this wonderful study.

LifeLight—An In-depth Study

LifeLight is a series of in-depth Bible studies. The goal of LifeLight is that through a regular program of in-depth personal and group study of Scripture, more and more Christian adults may grow in their personal faith in Jesus Christ, enjoy fellowship with the members of His body, and reach out in love to others in witness and service.

In-depth means that this Bible study includes the following four components: individual daily home study; discussion in a small group; a lecture presentation on the Scripture portion under study; and an enhancement of the week's material (through reading the enrichment magazine).

LifeLight Participants

LifeLight participants are adults who desire a deeper study of the Scriptures than is available in the typical Sunday morning adult Bible class. (Mid-to-older teens might also be LifeLight participants.) While LifeLight does not assume an existing knowledge of the Bible or special experience or skills in Bible study, it does assume a level of commitment that will bring participants to each of the nine weekly assemblies having read the assigned readings and attempted to answer the study questions. Daily reading and study will require from 15 to 30 minutes for the five days preceding the LifeLight assembly. The day following the assembly will be spent reviewing the previous week's study by going over the completed study leaflet and the enrichment magazine.

LifeLight Leadership

While the in-depth process used by LifeLight begins with individual study and cannot achieve its aims without this individual effort, it cannot be completed by individual study alone. Therefore, trained leaders are necessary. You fill one or perhaps more of the important roles described below.

The Director

This person oversees the LifeLight program in a local center (which may be a congregation or a center operated by several neighboring congregations). The director

- serves as the parish LifeLight overall coordinator and leader;
- coordinates the scheduling of the LifeLight program;
- orders materials;
- convenes LifeLight leadership-team meetings;
- develops publicity materials;
- recruits participants;
- maintains records and budgeting;
- assigns, with the leadership team, participants to small discussion groups;
- makes arrangements for facilities;
- communicates outreach opportunities to small-group leaders and to congregational boards;
- follows up on participants who leave the program.

The Assistant Director (*optional*)

This person may assist the director. Duties listed for the director may be assigned to the assistant director as mutually agreeable.

The Lecture Leader

This person prepares and delivers the lecture at the weekly assembly. (**Lesson material for the lecture leader begins on p. 9.**) The lecture leader

- prepares and presents the Bible study lecture to the large group;

- prepares worship activities (devotional thought, hymn, prayer), using resources in the study leaflet and leaders guide and possibly other, outside sources;
- helps the small-group discussion leaders to grow in understanding the content of the lessons;
- encourages prayer at weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders meetings.

The Small-Group Coordinator (*optional; the director may fill this role*)

This person supervises and coordinates the work of the small-group discussion leaders. The small-group coordinator

- recruits, with the leadership team, the small-group discussion leaders;
- trains or arranges for training of the discussion leaders;
- assists the director and discussion leaders in follow-up and outreach;
- encourages the discussion leaders to contact absent group members;
- participates in the weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders meetings;
- provides ongoing training and support as needed.

The Small-Group Discussion Leaders

These people guide and facilitate discussion of LifeLight participants in the small groups. (**Lesson material for the small-group leaders begins on p. 55.**) There should be one discussion leader for every group of no more than twelve participants. The small-group discussion leaders are, perhaps, those individuals who are most important to the success of the program. They should, therefore, be chosen with special care and be equipped with skills needed to guide discussion and to foster a caring fellowship within the group. These discussion leaders

- prepare each week for the small-group discussion by using the study leaflet and small-group leaders guide section for that session (**see p. 55**);
- read the enrichment magazine as a study supplement;
- guide and facilitate discussion in their small group;
- encourage and assist the discussion group in prayer;

- foster fellowship and mutual care within the discussion group;
- attend weekly discussion leaders training meetings.

Leadership Training

LifeLight leaders will meet weekly to review the previous week's work and plan the coming week. At this session, leaders can address concerns and prepare for the coming session. LifeLight is a 1 ½-hour program with no possibility for it to be taught in the one hour typically available on Sunday mornings. Some congregations, however, may want to use the Sunday morning Bible study hour for LifeLight preparation and leadership training. In such a meeting, the lecture leader and/or small-group coordinator may lead the discussion leaders through the coming week's lesson, reserving 5 or 10 minutes for problem solving or other group concerns.

While it requires intense effort, LifeLight has proven to bring great benefit to LifeLight participants. The effort put into this program, both by leaders and by participants, will be rewarding and profitable.

The LifeLight Weekly Schedule

Here is how LifeLight will work week by week:

1. Before session 1, each participant will receive the study leaflet for session 1 and the enrichment magazine for the course. The study leaflet contains worship resources (for use both in individual daily study and at the opening of the following week's assembly) and readings and study questions for five days. Challenge questions will lead those participants who have the time and desire a greater challenge into even deeper levels of study.
2. After the five days of individual study at home, participants will gather for a weekly assembly of all LifeLight participants. The assembly will begin with a brief period of worship (5 minutes). Participants will then join their assigned small discussion groups (of twelve or fewer, who will remain the same throughout the course), where they will go over the week's study questions together (55 minutes). Assembling together once again, participants will listen to a lecture presentation on the readings they have studied in the previous week and discussed in their small groups (20 minutes). After the lecture presentation, the director or another leader will distribute the study leaflet for the following week. Closing announcements and other necessary business may take another five minutes before dismissal.

In some places some small groups will not join the weekly assembly because of scheduling or other reasons. Such groups may meet at another time and place (perhaps in the home of one of the small group's members). Those congregations may record the lecture given by the lecture leader at the weekly assembly and duplicate it for use by other groups meeting later in the week.

3. On the day following the assembly, participants will review the preceding week's work by rereading the study leaflet they completed (and that they perhaps supplemented or corrected during the discussion in their small group) and by reading appropriate articles in the enrichment magazine.

Then the LifeLight weekly study process will begin all over again!

Recommended Study Resources and Worship

The Lutheran Study Bible. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009. This resource contains more than 26,000 study and application notes, a most thorough reference guide (pp. lxxv–cx), and over 90,000 cross-references, as well as a 31,000-entry concordance, maps, charts, and timelines.

Roehrs, Walter R., and Martin H. Franzmann. *Concordia Self-Study Commentary*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979. This one-volume commentary on the Bible contains 950 pages and is tailored for lay use.

The Concordia Organist is a 31-CD collection of pipe organ accompaniments for all the hymns and liturgical music in *Lutheran Service Book*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (order no. 99-2264). Use these CDs for worship hymn accompaniment.

Why Parables?

Matthew 13:34–35

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

It is difficult to describe what a parable is, because different parables work in different ways. Some exaggerate to make a point; others simply compare God's kingdom to earthly realities. All of them, however, reveal Jesus to us in order to work faith in our lives.

Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, will

1. understand both the obscuring and the revealing functions of parables;
2. trust God's Word, even if its effects are not always visible or obvious; and
3. find comfort and joy in knowing that they are God's pearl of great price.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 57.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *The Concordia Organist*. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.) Follow with this prayer:

Prayer

Merciful heavenly Father, whose Son entered this world as an infant and slept in a manger, open my eyes to the mighty work You do through means such as Your

Word and Sacraments, and help me to trust that You are at work for my salvation even when I cannot see it, through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Lecture Presentation

Introduction

Any study of the parables begins with making choices. One might work through the parables in each Gospel. Such an approach highlights the unique lessons each Gospel teaches us about our Savior, and it also ties the various parables of Jesus to their immediate context in Scripture. However, several parables appear in two or even three of the Gospel accounts. Moreover, such a study ignores interesting thematic relationships among the parables in different Gospels. For that reason, many scholars organize their studies of the parables according to specific categories: parables of the Kingdom, parables of salvation, parables of judgment, or the like. Such a procedure also has important strengths. It helps to bring out the continuity of Jesus' teachings in the various Gospels, so we remember that all four Gospels are the Word of God, which bears witness to His love for us in Jesus Christ. It also gives us nice mnemonic hooks for remembering the various parables and their meanings. At the same time, this procedure threatens to turn the parables into nifty little lessons about a variety of topics rather than perspective-shifting stories that reorient us from worldly wisdom to life in the kingdom of God.

The organizing principle for this study is thus focused on what each parable is supposed to accomplish in or do to us, the hearers. This approach also has its weaknesses; we will not necessarily see how each parable fits with the Gospel in which it is recorded, for example. However, we will study each parable in its immediate context and in the context of God's will to save each person through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Because we are studying the Word of God, and because Jesus told the parables both to inform and to transform us, we trust that the Spirit will use our study of the parables to create and strengthen faith.

Jesus' parables trace out the entire scriptural story, beginning with the radical grace of God in Christ by which He brings us into His kingdom, continuing through the

life of the Christian as a receiver and giver of mercy, and taking us to the blessed hope that is ours through our Savior. Jesus uses the parables to show how extravagant God's grace is, how selfish our own thinking can be, and how severe the judgment of God will be against those who do not place their trust in His Son, our Savior, Jesus. The parables preach to us. Using the parables, Jesus speaks the Holy Spirit into our hearts, and He shapes and forms us into followers of Jesus who trust Him and Him alone for righteousness and salvation. In today's session, we will examine several parables that clearly illustrate this.

1 The Purpose of Parables (Matthew 13:10–17)

Jesus offers a rather different explanation for the purpose of the parables than many are used to. Jesus was sitting on the beach of the Sea of Galilee, (Matthew 13:2–3) "and great crowds gathered about Him, so that He got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And He told them many things in parables." Jesus told eight parables that day, beginning with the parable of the sower. His disciples then posed the question, (v. 10) "Why do You speak to them in parables?" Jesus' answer is confusing: (v. 11) "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." Jesus goes on to explain why He speaks to them in parables:

(Vv. 13–15) Because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: "You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive." For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.

If it sounds as though Jesus is using parables to hide the truth from the people, then you have understood His words. Obviously, such an understanding contradicts what we believe about our Savior: that He seeks lost sinners and died for them; that He and the Father send the Spirit through Word and Sacrament to work faith in our hearts; that God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—wants all people to be saved. How then shall we understand Jesus' words?

Reading the original context of the quotation from Isaiah helps—at least a little. The quotation comes from

Isaiah 6:9–10. Isaiah 6 begins with Isaiah's vision of the Lord in the temple. Isaiah sees the Lord and cries out, (v. 5) "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Isaiah is conscious of the words he has spoken that make his lips unclean, and he is conscious of the unclean words the people of the land had spoken. The people had worshiped false, foreign gods for centuries. Isaiah knew that sinners could not stand in the presence of the Lord's holiness, so he feared for himself and the people.

The Lord nevertheless sent an angel to touch a glowing coal to Isaiah's lips as a sign of God's cleansing and forgiveness. The Lord then called Isaiah to preach to the people of Judah. However, his mission—at least at first—was not to preach good news, or the Gospel, or forgiveness. It was to (v. 10) "make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." Isaiah's job was to preach this unwelcome news to the people until their land lay in waste and they themselves were in exile.

The reason is that the people had grown hard-hearted. For centuries, they had failed to worship the Lord their God with all their heart and soul and mind. Despite all of God's warnings through the prophets, sternly delivered out of love, the people had continued to follow after other gods. Sometimes, they paid lip service to the true God but also worshiped other gods in supposedly sacred places on hills and in forests. Sometimes, they did not even bother worshiping the true God. If a good and faithful king came to the throne, the people rarely followed him wholeheartedly, and even if they did, his successor typically turned from the true God to worship false gods. By the time of Isaiah, God's patience was wearing thin, because the people were taking advantage of it. He was preparing to bring on the people of Israel and Judah the punishments He had threatened in the Books of Moses. He was sending Isaiah to them so they would have no excuse, but He was also speaking to them through Isaiah in a way that would only harden their hearts further so that they would finally receive the full consequences of their sin. They were not repentant, so God was hiding His message of forgiveness from them.

The situation in Jesus' day was somewhat different, but the underlying problem was the same. The people had

long before given up worshiping the false gods of the surrounding nations. They were insistent on worshiping the God of their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, as we have seen, many of them worshiped in a way wholly inconsistent with God's grace and mercy. In the Gospel of John (8:39–47), Jesus goes so far as to call them children of the devil rather than children of Abraham. While they were worshiping the true God with their lips, they were trusting in a false god called "Keeping and Exceeding the Law." They believed that keeping the Law made them righteous, and they acted as if going above and beyond the Law by fasting more often than required or tithing on more than required made them even more righteous. By the time we get to Matthew 13, the Pharisees have set themselves firmly against Jesus.

During His earthly ministry, then, Jesus used parables both to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God and to announce God's judgment against those who put their trust in the wrong god. The parables are meant to obscure the truth from people who trust in their own righteousness—a truth that should have been sufficiently evident from the writings of the Old Testament, as we saw in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). By telling the parables, Jesus left the self-righteous without any excuse, but He also further stopped their already stopped ears to the truth. If they were going to reject the grace of God, He would simply give them a good hard push down the road they had chosen.

This seems radically unfair, but, it is not. In the end, every single one of us deserves nothing less than the full wrath of God. The people whose ears were being stopped and whose eyes were being closed are no more and no less guilty than you and I. Moreover, Jesus had already preached to these people extensively, and they simply refused to hear the good news He was preaching. In a sense, by preaching in parables that stopped the peoples' ears, He was giving them what they already wanted. Finally, by pushing them further down the road of unbelief, He was preparing them to experience the just wrath of God in hopes that they might, in the end, repent.

2 The Other Purpose of Parables (Matthew 13:34–35)

Thankfully, Jesus also made clear that He did not intend for everyone to have their ears stopped and their eyes closed. He made a distinction between the disciples and the other people. (Matthew 13:11) "To you it has been

given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven," He told them, "but to them it has not been given." After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, the Holy Spirit would move these men to preach the good news of salvation freely and openly. Jesus was entrusting them with the Gospel of the kingdom of God so that they would be prepared to reveal what had long been hidden. That is why Matthew writes concerning the same string of parables, (vv. 34–35) "All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, He said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: 'I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.'" This quotation is from Psalm 78:2, a psalm of Asaph that recounts the many ways in which God saved the people of Israel through the centuries. By referring to the psalm, Jesus is implying that the parables are intended to reveal and disclose the ultimate saving act of God, which has been hidden from the foundation of the world: His own sacrificial death on the cross. The parables thus serve not only to stop ears and close eyes; they also serve to unstop ears and open eyes.

It is telling that Jesus chose to explain the parables to His disciples. It is even more telling is that Jesus told the disciples, (vv. 16–17) "Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." The disciples are uniquely privileged in two ways. First, God has blessed them by opening their eyes and ears to the good news of His salvation. We cannot see or understand that good news on our own; God Himself must bless us with His Holy Spirit, who opens our eyes and unstops our ears. Faith itself is a gift from God, and the disciples were already experiencing that gift. Second, their eyes were able to see the one whom the prophets had long foretold, the answer to humanity's pain and suffering, the Savior who reconciles us to the Father. With their ears, they were able to hear the Gospel message proclaimed in its fullness for the first time, and from the mouth of God Himself. They had the privilege of seeing the Savior whom so many had waited for, and they had the privilege of hearing the words that so many had longed to hear.

You and I live on the other side of the sacrificial death of our Savior. We have not seen our Savior in the flesh, nor have we heard the actual voice of our Savior. However, we are disciples. We, like the disciples to whom Jesus was speaking in Matthew 13, have received the blessing that opens our ears and eyes to the great act of salvation

God accomplished for us in Christ. For us, the parables reveal rather than obscure. The parables break through our everyday ways of thinking to show us the radical grace of God, and they throw us off balance to change our perspective so we think like people of God's kingdom. They are not nifty little lessons intended to convey some doctrinal point. They are not morality stories like Aesop's Fables or the tales we tell our children. They are the Word of God in concentrated form, intended to open our eyes to what human eyes cannot see: full and complete forgiveness, extravagant mercy, and God-in-the-flesh who died on a cross.

3 From Small Beginnings (Matthew 13:31–33)

The parables of Matthew 13 are often referred to as the kingdom parables, because most of them begin with the phrase "the kingdom of heaven is like . . ." The first two we will consider are the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven.

The first likens the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed: (Matthew 13:32) "It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." Whether the mustard seed is actually the smallest seed really does not matter; the point is that a tiny seed can grow into a garden plant that dwarfs the other plants. Botanical authorities disagree about how large a mustard plant could grow, but that detail does not matter either. If the kingdom of heaven is like a small seed that sprouts and grows into a shrub or tree large enough to hold birds and their nests, then something large has grown from something quite small. The kingdom of God is like that: Jesus, the son of a carpenter, would lose His struggle with the Pharisees and end up hung on a Roman cross. His disciples were ordinary, uneducated men whose previous professions had been fishing, collecting taxes, and a variety of other less-than-religious occupations. Yet, despite its inauspicious beginnings, the kingdom of God has grown to encompass people of every tribe and people and language and nation. In fact, the parable may be an allusion to Nebuchadnezzar's vision in Daniel 4. There, the birds stand for the nations of the world under Babylon's dominion. If we read the parable of the mustard seed in the same way, then the birds in Jesus' parable stand for people from all the nations of the world. The kingdom has grown immensely from a small beginning.

The second parable has a slightly different lesson. (Matthew 13:33) "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened." Leaven is a substance (such as yeast) that interacts with dough or a liquid to produce carbon dioxide, which causes the product to rise. A small amount goes a long way. Moreover, as Jesus points out by using the word "hid," we cannot see the leaven at work. It mixes in with the flour and does its work "secretly," so to speak. The kingdom of heaven works in the same way. When the good news of Jesus Christ is preached, a little can create tremendous faith. It works secretly, however, behind the scenes in the heart of people. We cannot always see right away whether it is working or not, and sometimes its effects may not be evident immediately, but eventually it will produce fruit in those who hear it.

Together, these two parables bring great comfort to Christian congregations—especially small ones. Small congregations sometimes unnecessarily suffer from an inferiority complex. The seed of God's Word has been planted in them as well as in large congregations, and the seed has already grown into a plant. The very fact that a congregation exists in that place means that the kingdom of God is at work. At the same time, we human beings often get impatient if programs, preaching, or teaching do not produce results right away. Such impatience is nothing more than a lack of trust in the hidden Word of God, which accomplishes God's purposes for it. Where the Word of God is preached and the Sacraments are administered rightly, the Holy Spirit is at work building His kingdom, whether we see it or not.

4 God's Precious People (Matthew 13:44–46)

The final two parables we examine today are also from Matthew 13: the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great value. Both of these parables have often been understood to teach that a Christian should be willing to leave everything in order to follow Jesus. Certainly, this interpretation fits with statements Jesus makes elsewhere, but a couple of considerations might cause us to question it anyway.

First, in all of the other parables in Matthew 13, the main character of the parable represents God or God's kingdom. We should expect that the pattern will hold true in these two parables as well. That would mean the merchant in the parable of the pearl stands for God, and it would mean that the man who found the treasure in the parable of the hidden treasure also stands for God.

Second, both parables speak of selling everything to gain something else. If the parables are meant to show us what true discipleship is, then they oddly imply that we can purchase the kingdom of heaven. That is clearly not the case. Moreover, although Jesus certainly asks us to be willing to leave our father and mother and everything else to follow Him, He does not tell us that we must do so in every instance. Nor does He tell us we must sell everything to follow Him. The closest He comes is in Matthew 19:21, where He tells the young man, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." However, in that passage, Jesus knows the young man cannot do so.

Finally, the main characters in both parables perform some shocking actions. In the case of the treasure hidden in a field, we might be able to explain the man's actions by supposing that the treasure he found is so great that it is worth more than his total assets. Selling his assets to buy the field might be a good investment, because he would get a good return. However, for the merchant to sell everything to purchase the one valuable pearl is simply a bad business decision. Since he is a merchant, his job is to buy and sell goods. If he's risking his whole financial existence on this one pearl, he must believe that he can resell it for significantly more than it cost him, which is not likely. It is possible to explain both men's actions, but only by imagining details that are not actually in the parables. Without those details, each man is making a bizarrely irrational decision.

However, it is precisely that kind of bizarrely irrational behavior that resulted from God's desire to bring us into His kingdom. He was willing to sacrifice His own Son, Jesus Christ, to purchase us for His kingdom. Already in the Old Testament, God had declared that the people He had chosen were His "treasured possession" and the "apple of His eye," and in the New Testament we see that God is willing to give up His own life in the person of Jesus Christ in order to redeem us for the Kingdom. In other words, these two parables are not about discipleship; they are about salvation. God is like both the pearl merchant and the man in the field. He spent more than He needed to in order to make you His own. In fact, to purchase you, He spent more than you were worth. He spent the life of Jesus.

Conclusion

After just this initial look at the parables in the Bible, there are a few conclusions that we can already draw. The parables are stories meant to break through the blindness of our sin so that we can see how God is working through Jesus Christ to bring us into His eternal kingdom. They shake us out of our confidence in our own righteousness and challenge us to rely on the radical, extravagant grace of God. They reveal our selfish and self-centered ways, and they open our eyes to the mercy we can show to people around us. Finally, they remind us that our Savior will come again to judge the living and the dead, and they remind us to be ready by living lives of faith, faith that comes by hearing God's Word and receiving the Sacraments. Sometimes, the depictions are realistic, and sometimes they are far from realistic; nevertheless, they always point us toward what is most important for this life and the next: our Savior, Jesus, and the salvation He won for us on the cross.

Concluding Activities

Conclude the session with an appropriate prayer and distribute the study leaflet for week 2.

Something Old, Something New

Matthew 9:15–17

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

Jesus' work and mission is radically new compared to the ceremonial laws given through Moses—and that is a good thing, because it means God receives us into His kingdom for Christ's sake, not on account of our works.

Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, will

1. trust Christ to work through His parables to produce faith;
2. understand how Christ supplants the Mosaic Law; and
3. rejoice in God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 59.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *The Concordia Organist*. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.) Follow with this prayer:

Prayer

Good and gracious Father, whose Son shows us the true meaning of the Old Testament in the forgiveness He won for us on the cross, use the parables I study in the coming weeks to plant the seed of Your Word in my heart, that I may attain life everlasting, through Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen.

Lecture Presentation

Introduction

Our heavenly Father went to a lot of trouble to rescue us sinners. He appointed His Son before the foundation of the world to die on a cross for us. He created us even though He knew it would cost the life of His Son. He gave His Son into death as the sacrifice for our sins. He then received His Son, our Savior, Jesus, into glory, where Jesus now sits at His right hand. Thankfully, that is not the end of the story. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He told His apostles, (Acts 1:8) "You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Our gracious Father wanted—and still wants—"all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). What is true for everyone is also true for you—your gracious heavenly Father wants you to hear the good news that He forgives you for Jesus' sake, so that you will look away from your sins and look to the gracious words of your Savior, Jesus. Our heavenly Father thus plays the part of the indiscriminate, even wasteful farmer who scatters his precious seed without any thought for its value, in hopes that some of it might grow up and bear fruit. Today, as you continue this LifeLight Bible study on the parables of Jesus, your loving heavenly Father is up to the same thing. He is planting the seed of His Word in your heart to create and strengthen faith in Jesus. It is in His Son that God freely gives us something that, while it was long promised, is radically new and unexpected—something old, yet something entirely new.

1 Something New

How the New Testament relates to the Old Testament is an old question that scholars still argue about. Perhaps you have heard that the Old Testament gives us the Law while the New Testament gives us the Gospel. However, if by “Law” we mean God’s demands for how we should live, as well as His threats of punishment and promises of reward, then the New Testament has Law too. Moreover, if by “Gospel” we mean God’s promise to give salvation through the Messiah to those who cannot save themselves, then the Old Testament has some Gospel passages that are every bit as poetic and powerful as New Testament passages.

Some people argue that the New Testament records the fulfillment of the Old Testament—that is, it shows us how God kept the Law perfectly, brought His prophecies to fruition, and accomplished His plan of salvation, all through our Savior, Jesus Christ. Such a position is much stronger than the idea that the Old Testament is Law while the New Testament is Gospel, but it still has problems. It suggests, for example, that the Old Testament is not quite enough. However, Jesus Himself preached from the Old Testament rather than the New (because the New Testament had not been written yet), and for at least a decade the earliest Christians also made do without the New Testament books. Moreover, both the Old and New Testaments have prophecies that have not yet been fulfilled—both testaments tell us about a time in which God will fully vanquish all the powers of sin, death, and the devil and bring His holy people to live with Him bodily in a newly created heaven and earth.

Perhaps the correct answer is to ask a different question, namely, what did Jesus say about His own mission as the Messiah and Savior? Three of His parables—the bridegroom’s guests, the unshrunk cloth, and the new wine in old wineskins—show that Jesus sharply distinguished Himself and His mission from the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. They bear witness that Jesus Christ is something radically new compared to the Law of Moses.

These three parables follow one right after another in all three Synoptic Gospels (that is, Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The context is almost identical in all three of the Gospels as well. Matthew 8:1–4 tells the story of Jesus cleansing a leper; then Matthew includes a few other stories before he relates in chapter 9 how Jesus healed

the paralytic and then called Levi, or Matthew, the tax collector and ate at his house. In Mark and Luke, these three stories follow one after another with nothing in between. In all three Gospels, the Pharisees reveal their opposition to Jesus for the first time in one of these three narratives (in the calling of Levi in Matthew and Mark; in the healing of the paralytic in Luke). Jesus tells the parables in response to people who ask why He and His disciples are not fasting, since John’s disciples and the Pharisee’s disciples are. These three accounts provide a rich context for understanding the meaning of these parables.

2 Cleansing, Healing, and Calling

In the first occasion, the cleansing of the leper, a man with an infectious skin disease came and begged Jesus for healing. (Mark 1:40) “If You will, You can make me clean,” he said. It is significant that the man asked to be made clean rather than simply to be healed. According to the laws God gave Moses at Mount Sinai, a person with an infectious skin disease was unclean. Such a condition meant not simply that one was sick; it also meant that one was not permitted to enter the temple, the place in which God showed His gracious favor to His people, and it meant that one had to stay away from other people. The man does not simply want to be healed of a painful condition; he also wants to be made clean according to the Law of Moses so he can once again enjoy fellowship with other people and with God. By placing this account here, the three Gospel writers are drawing attention to the relationship between Jesus and the Law of Moses.

The Law of Moses is not simply the Ten Commandments. God gave much more to Moses at Sinai. He gave Moses the blueprints and altar-guild manual for the traveling tabernacle, or dwelling place, in which He would appear to the people during their trek to the Promised Land. This tabernacle, in turn, provided the guidelines for the temple King Solomon would build nearly five hundred years later. God also gave Moses the constitution, bylaws, and worship orders for the temple. God established what is called the Levitical priesthood, with all its associated rules and rituals. Moses’ brother Aaron became the first priest; the priests had a variety of jobs, including that of acting as mediators between God and the people through sacrifices and determining who was clean and unclean.

What is amazing about the cleansing of the leper is not only that Jesus healed the man, but also that Jesus made the man clean when he touched Him, instead of becoming unclean Himself. The priests' job was simply to declare whether a person was clean or unclean. If a person with leprosy found himself healed, the person could come to the priests with specific offerings, and they could declare him clean. However, the priests had no power to make someone clean. Jesus, on the other hand, cleanses the leper. Jesus is not bound by the Mosaic laws, which means He is not bound by the Levitical priesthood.

The healing of the paralytic makes a similar point. A man's friends bring him to Jesus, who is preaching in a home. The friends cannot get through the crowd, so they go to the roof, cut through, and lower the man down right in front of Jesus. (Mark 2:5) "And when Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'" The first question we ask is why Jesus doesn't heal the man. For the scribes and Pharisees, however, a much more theologically charged question comes to mind: (v. 7) "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" If a mere human (as Jesus seemed to be) announced forgiveness, he is claiming to be God. Jesus thus finds Himself in open conflict with the scribes and Pharisees—or rather, He finds himself in open conflict with their understanding of the Scriptures. In forgiving sins, Jesus is setting Himself above the Law of Moses.

Finally, the calling of Matthew (or Levi) brings this conflict to a head. Matthew was a Jew who had signed up as a tax collector. He worked for the occupying Roman force, which meant he was cooperating with the Gentiles who were keeping the Jewish people in submission. He was likely assigned to collect customs taxes on the goods people transported, and such tax collectors were notorious for overestimating the value of goods in order to enrich themselves. Even Roman writers compared them to robbers. As far as the scribes and Pharisees were concerned, tax collectors ranked at about the same level as prostitutes. Jesus, however, called Matthew to follow Him; Jesus went and ate at his house, despite the fact that tax collectors and other blatant sinners were eating there too. In the eyes of the Pharisees, associating with such people was to condone their sin and make oneself unclean. Jesus once again shows that He will not abide by the Pharisees' interpretation of the Scripture. He tells them, (v. 17) "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the

righteous, but sinners." His mission requires Him to associate with sinners and tax collectors, because they are the ones who need what He brings.

3 Celebrating Rather Than Mourning

A question about fasting drives the point home and introduces the three parables in question. (Mark 2:18) "John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting." People come and ask Jesus why His disciples do not fast. Jesus says to them, (vv. 19–20) "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day." For such a short passage, this parable is full of meaning. First, we need to understand how the Pharisees and other Jews understood fasting. Second, we need to learn why Jesus refers to Himself as the Bridegroom. Finally, we need to come to grips with Jesus' statement that the wedding guests will fast when the bridegroom is taken from them.

Fasting was important for the Pharisees. Jews were known throughout the Roman Empire for fasting; the Romans even had a saying: "Fasting like a Jew." In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the Pharisee brags to God that he fasts twice a week. The Pharisees believed fasting played a role in making them righteous in God's sight. It is possible that Pharisees believed their good works, such as fasting, actually made them righteous in God's sight apart from any grace on His part. However, contemporary scholarship suggests that the Pharisees believed God had chosen the people of Israel out of sheer grace. However, if contemporary scholarship is correct, the Pharisees also believed that their good works were their way of keeping up their side of the covenant with God. On this reading, they believed that fasting helped to keep them in God's grace. Either way, the Pharisees believed that the Scriptures gave their works an important role in their salvation.

Clearly, Jesus disagreed with them. The wedding imagery He used helps to explain why. Imagine that you have been invited to a wedding. Why have you been invited? You have been invited because of your relationship to the bride, the groom, or their families. Because of your relationship with them, the family wishes for you to share the joy of this occasion with them. In Jesus' day, eating had an even greater social significance than it does today: to show up at a wedding and then refuse

to eat would have been an insult to the couple. It would have been a way of saying, “We know that today is a day of great joy for you, but we are choosing to treat it as a day of repentance or sadness.” It would, in short, be a way of deliberately not sharing in the joy of the day. For Jesus’ disciples to fast while He was with them, then, would imply that they did not rejoice at His invitation to them to follow Him. The time would certainly come when He would not be with them and they would fast, but while He was with them, it was time to rejoice.

That Jesus refers to Himself as the Bridegroom only heightens the point. When speaking of the salvation God would accomplish for His people, the prophet Isaiah had prophesied, (62:5) “As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.” When Jesus and His disciples began baptizing, John the Baptist said, (John 3:29) “The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the Bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.” By calling Himself the Bridegroom, Jesus may be subtly indicating that the messianic age—that time of the Messiah—has come now that He has arrived. Moreover, if people were invited to a wedding because of their relationship to the bride or groom, then Jesus’ role as the Bridegroom emphasizes that He is the reason for the celebration. The people at Levi’s house are eating with Him because He has called Levi to follow Him as a disciple, and Levi has followed that call. Jesus Himself becomes the focal point of the celebration. He calls people together to the messianic banquet. Finally, as the Bridegroom, He is ushering Himself and His Bride into a new beginning. The disciples are here to celebrate this new beginning with Him.

Jesus is signaling the arrival of something utterly new—something greater than the Mosaic Law and the religious rituals through which the people have judged their religiosity. If the Pharisees judge their righteousness on the basis of their works, and if they judge the righteousness of others on the basis of works, then they have misunderstood the role of the Mosaic Law and religious rituals. These laws and rituals are not meant to exclude people from God’s kingdom; rather, God seeks to bring all people into His kingdom, especially the unrighteous, the open sinners, and the tax collectors. That is why the disciples of Jesus feast at Matthew’s house—because God has graciously accepted them in Christ. These people have nothing to prove by fasting, because they could not prove anything anyway. Yet, these are the people Jesus calls as disciples, and these are the people with whom Jesus chooses to enjoy table fellowship.

Compared to the Pharisees, and even compared to the ceremonial laws that God propagated through Moses, Jesus is doing something new.

Jesus reiterates the newness of His ministry with two more parables. (Mark 2:21) “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.” In the first century, people called “fullers” took recently woven cloth and prepared it for use in clothing; part of the process was to preshrink the cloth. Cloth that had not gone through the process would be liable to shrinkage. If one used this unshrunk cloth to patch up a garment, one risked having the unprepared cloth shrink significantly; in doing so, it would end up ripping out part of the original garment. Common sense said that the new, unshrunk cloth should not be sewn to the old. Likewise, wineskins—that is, leather canteens used to carry wine—grew brittle and stiff with age. New wine had been fermented once in vats, but it continued to ferment for a time. The fermentation process, in which yeasts consume the sugars, produces carbon dioxide as a by-product. It is not difficult to see that an older, brittle wineskin would not hold up well to the pressure produced by the gases as the new wine continued to ferment. Therefore, (v. 22) “no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.” What Jesus is doing is so new that it cannot be contained in the Levitical laws.

Conclusion

Jesus is something new. He is not bound by the old, Mosaic way of dealing with uncleanness. In Him, righteousness is not tied to good works or rituals such as fasting. Indeed, in Him, even the unrighteous find a seat at the table. The Old Testament said the same thing. Jeremiah wrote, (31:31–32) “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD.” Instead of asking how the Old Testament relates to the New Testament, we do better to ask with Jesus—and Jeremiah, Isaiah, Paul, and others—how the covenant at Mount Sinai relates to the grace God shows us in Jesus Christ. In short, Jesus is something new. The covenant at Sinai, the Mosaic Law, the rules about clean and unclean, and

even rituals such as fasting cannot show us the way to Jesus, even if they give us hints about Him. With Jesus' arrival, God's pure grace simply overwhelms the old things so that they tear like old garments when brand-new cloth is used to patch them. They burst like old wineskins when new, sweeter wine is poured in. They put our focus in the wrong place, as if a wedding were a time to fast. Jesus brings God's grace, and He shows us that God intends that grace for everyone: not for those who keep the Law of Moses or those who lead upright and moral lives or those who fast twice weekly, but for those who are hopelessly unclean, according to the Law of Moses, for those who have no rituals to offer God, for those whose lives are less than perfect. In short, these three parables point you away from your works and toward the radical, new grace God gives you in His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Concluding Activities

Conclude the session with an appropriate prayer and distribute the study leaflet for week 3.