

The background features a collage of various elements. At the top, there are several overlapping coins, including a 50-cent Euro coin and a 10-cent Euro coin. Scattered throughout the page are several orange geometric shapes, including triangles, squares, and a larger complex polygon. The overall color palette is a mix of light green, yellow, and orange.

Parables

Trusting to Live in the Kingdom

A Weekly Reminder Guide

The Parables

Thank you for taking part in walking through the parables of Christ. The parables were designed to be memorable stories that would be revisited by the mind of the hearer as they went about their everyday. The purpose of the parables were to be the means of ever maturing truth as the hearer continued to ponder their meaning and uncover the truth that was being shared.

For those of us who have grown up in the church, these stories will likely be familiar. Please be on guard not to just write off the reading of the parables this time as an exercise in repetition. Every time that you approach the parable with an open heart and a desire to find the truth, you will uncover even more of what the Lord has for you. These parables will grow and mature with you as you grow and mature in the Lord. They are an ever-flowing fountain of truth, wisdom, grace, and life-change.

With each parable that we will cover on Sunday mornings, there is a corresponding reference page in this guide. My hope is that you will take time during the week to read the page either in preparation for the coming Sunday and/or in reflection of the previous Sunday. My prayer is that this guide will provide an opportunity for continued wrestling with the story and for the Holy Spirit to imprint the truth of the parable upon your heart. As it is said in so many parables that Jesus spoke, the Word is like a seed that when planted begins to sprout, grow, and mature until it is able to hold our faith, hope, and love.

On each page, you will find a brief synopsis of the parable to remind you of the story. There is a breakdown of the characters in the parable and who or what they represent. Knowing who the characters represent is key to proper interpretation of the parables. Through the parables, Jesus challenged many of the cultural conventions of the day that stood in opposition to the Lord design and view of things. There is also a brief devotional teaching of the truth presented in the parable followed by some reflection questions. I am praying this guide is of benefit as you grow and mature in Christ.

- Paul Allen

The Sower

Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15

Week of August 3

SYNOPSIS

A farmer sows his seed in a field. The seed falls among different types of soil. The conditions of each kind of soil impact the growth and maturity of the seed to be able to bear fruit.

CHARACTERS

The Farmer: The Lord God

The Seed: The Word of God

The Soil: The Condition of the Heart that Hears the Word

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

As Jesus taught the crowds, it was apparent that not everyone responded in the same way to the truth of His words. Not everyone received the truth of His words, and those that did receive His words received them in different ways. There were those in the crowds, the Pharisees, whose hearts were set against the Lord and concerned with their own wants and ways. Their hearts were hardened by the message of Jesus. The cultural convention was that the teachers of the law, because of their position, were the most spiritual and closest to the Lord. The parable of the sower clearly states that it is the condition of the heart as it receives the truth that determines the fruit that will be brought forth, not titles, church attendance, good deeds or upbringing.

THE TRUTH

God is the faithful farmer who spreads His truth faithfully to take root in the hearts of His creation. He has sown both general truth, like His existence, and specific truth, like the means of salvation, for all who have ears to hear and eyes to see to be able to behold. All of creation have had the truth of God impact their heart. The impact of that truth has been determined and continues to be determined by the state of our hearts as we receive. At times, our hearts are in the condition of the wayside soil where we were uninterested in the truth and before it could be pondered and mulled over, the evil one snatched it away. Our hearts were not ready to hear the Word of the Lord as truth. In other seasons, the condition of our heart is like the stony places and the truth tries to take root but quickly dwindles and dies. We are not ready to take a posture of obedience to the truth so while the truth sounds good at first, we resume our current course because it is easier and more familiar. Other times, our heart is in the condition of soil littered with thistles and thorns. The truth springs forth, but it is unable to compete with the many other things that are battling for our attention and priority. Being torn between multiple priorities, the truth of God is choked out. We can not serve two masters. And then in some seasons, our hearts are ready to receive the truth of God, and when we receive it, our life is reprioritized in accordance with His Word. Here we see the Word transform us and conform us to the image of the Lord and His will.

REFLECTION

When you hear the truth of God and/or when you read God's Word, which soil do you see yourself as? Do you see the corresponding outcome from that soil posture in your life?

What practices would be beneficial to incorporate in your life to help you receive the truth as good soil more often?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

Before a farmer sows the seed, he is well served to till or plow the soil. Tilling is a process of turning over and breaking up the soil in preparation for receiving the seed. This process improves soil aeration, drainage and weed control to create a suitable seedbed. With this in mind, it may serve us well to till the soil of our hearts in preparation for receiving God's Word. This week, try listening to worship music, spending time in prayer, or having a conversation with God in the beauty of His creation before sitting in the Word.

The Weeds

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Week of August 10

SYNOPSIS

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who sows good seed in a field. In the night, an enemy comes and sows weeds in the same field. As the good seed sprang forth, so did the weeds. The servants came and asked the man if they should pull the weeds. The man tells them to let both the weeds and the wheat grow together and when it is time for harvest, they will reap both and divide the wheat and the weeds.

CHARACTERS

The Man who Sows the Good Seed: Jesus Christ

The Field: The World

The Good Seed: The People of the Kingdom

The Weeds: The People of the Evil One

The Enemy: The Devil

The Harvest: The Judgment Seat of the Lord

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

The Lord has allowed both the righteous and the wicked to mature in the Kingdom of God. This parable of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like challenges our views and understanding of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is not merely speaking of heaven, for the wicked do not mature among the righteous there. The Kingdom of Heaven is present in the here and now, where both the righteous and unrighteous grow and mature together. God's delay in judgment is therefore so that the wheat may not be mistakenly pulled as weeds.

THE TRUTH

The parable of the weeds challenges our perspective on the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is the sower of the good seed. He is the owner of the field, this world, and He has sown righteous people in the world. Alongside the good seed, weeds, unrighteous people, have been sown by the evil one, Satan. This is the reality of the world that we live in, those that follow and know the Lord living alongside those who despise the Lord. Jesus reveals to the hearer that the righteous and the unrighteous are difficult to distinguish in this life. Desiring not to have any who are righteous "plucked" with the unrighteous in an attempt to de-weed the field, the harvesters have been instructed to wait until the Judgment Day, when the good seed and the weeds are mature and easily distinguished. It is human nature to be quick to make judgments about one another. When we set the standards and define the criteria for righteousness, we will find ourselves guilty of plucking the righteous with the unrighteous. Since the righteous and unrighteous are difficult to distinguish before they are mature, our hearts should take the posture of treating one another as righteous seeds in the process of maturing. The desire of Christ is not to lose even one righteous seed. May this speak to our desire as well.

REFLECTION

Who are people in your life that may have been plucked with the unrighteous if they had been judged on first glance or before they had time to mature and grow?

What does it say to you about God that He is patient in giving all people the time to mature and grow before casting His eternal judgment of them? What does that mean for your life?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

In my religious upbringing, much has been emphasized about the world belonging to the Prince of the Air. In the explanation of this parable, Jesus states that the field is the world and the field belongs to Him. This brings great encouragement. Our Savior is reclaiming what had been lost. His Kingdom has come and His dominion is retaking lives stolen by the evil one. When it feels like the enemy is winning, be reminded that the owner of the field has planted you intentionally to bear good fruit.

The Mustard Seed

Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19

Week of August 17

SYNOPSIS

The kingdom of heaven is described as being like a mustard seed that is planted in a field. Though the seed is small, it will grow into the largest plant in the garden, even able to support the weight of birds that come and perch in its branches.

CHARACTERS

Mustard Seed: The Truth of the Gospel

The Man Who Planted the Seed: Holy Spirit

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

The social convention of the day was that the truth was to be shared with great spectacle and in front of large crowds, like was the custom of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Jesus shared the truth of the kingdom of heaven in the rural countryside of Galilee. He was even confronted by his family to go to Jerusalem and preach the truth there so that it would fit the social convention of the day (John 7:3-4). The kingdom of heaven would start small, with one man and then twelve disciples, but it would grow into something that would overtake the world.

THE TRUTH

The mustard seed is not the smallest seed in the flora of the Middle East, but the mustard seed was the colloquial picture for something of insignificant size. In His parable, Jesus employs the picture of the mustard seed to paint a visual picture of the growth potential of the truth of the gospel. The gospel starts small in our lives. It begins as a word of truth that pierces the carefully constructed sphere of our current situation and reveals to us that there is a greater hope, greater love, greater peace, and greater salvation available outside of ourselves and what the world has to offer. This simple word of truth, when allowed to take root, begins to pierce the spheres of other circumstances, relationships and aspects of our life revealing, once again, greater hope, love, peace, and salvation. When allowed to take root and mature in each of these areas of our lives, the gospel expands and grows.

As the truth continues to grow and mature, it permeates more and more areas of our life, supporting the power of the truth it shapes each area of our life to reflect and be lived out in light of the Kingdom of God. Soon, our whole life will be supported by the power of the truth. Every new circumstance and situation that arises is then able to be perched in the branches of the truth of the gospel and what Christ has and continues to do in, through, and for us.

REFLECTION

Where in your life has the truth of the gospel taken root and transformed your perspective on a circumstance and/or changed the way that you handle yourself or others in a specific situation?

In what areas of your life are you reluctant to allow the truth of the gospel to pierce the safety sphere that you have constructed? Why are you reluctant? What are you afraid God will do or require of/from you?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

We live in a culture of instant gratification and time blindness. Our desire for instant gratification has trained our hearts to quickly abandon things that do not produce the desired results swiftly. We have deemed ourselves as the righteous judge over reasonable timing for the desired results to manifest. As a result, we rarely ever experience true growth and maturity because we abandon the truth of the Word, because we have not seen results in a timely manner. This feeds into our time blindness. Time blindness is the inability to accurately perceive and manage time. This leads to our setting of unreasonable timelines, deadlines, and schedules. Our time blindness sets an unreasonable timeline for maturity and growth, which is reinforced by our need for instant gratification. Our prayer should be one for supernatural patience.

The Leaven

Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21

Week of August 24

SYNOPSIS

The kingdom of heaven is described as being like yeast that is worked into 60 pounds of flour until it is worked through the entire dough.

CHARACTERS

The Yeast: The Truth of the Kingdom of Heaven

The Flour: The Hearers Heart and Life

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

Culture is what people believe without thinking and act on without explanation or justification. Culture is entirely built upon popular acceptance. Jesus came and taught truth that was not accepted by the culture. Even though it was not accepted by the majority, popular acceptance is not what determines the validity of truth. Through His parables, Jesus conveyed the truth such a way that the listener would be able to hear and experience His words in a manner that it impacted the active flow of their lives. Like yeast in flour, a small, simple truth would continue to grow as it is kneaded into the flow of life by the hearer until the truth permeated the whole of their life. This is how truth subverts the oppression of culture and popular acceptance.

THE TRUTH

When Jesus spoke that the kingdom of heaven is like yeast (leaven), everyone knew about leaven and what it did. They knew that it only took a small amount of leaven, between 1-2% of the amount of flour, to transform the dough from flat and dense to light and airy. They would have immediately recognized it as something that starts small but then expands and works quietly throughout the whole dough. What hope this would have been for the first century hearer who had felt so oppressed by their religious belief. The first century Jewish believer was bound by both physical and spiritual oppression. The Roman occupiers and the Jewish religious leaders taxed the common Jew relentlessly. From taxes to keep the war machine of Rome moving forward to temple taxes and exorbitant sacrificial purchases to finance the lifestyle of the religious elite and the legacy of wicked "kings," the Jewish believer was drowning financially, never being able to work hard enough to meet all the demands. When they turned to God for help, the religious leaders denied them grace and mercy, but instead met them with instruction to do more, give more or face the wrath of God. Jesus teaching that the truth of God was available and that the common man was able to hear the truth, understand the truth and then be transformed by the truth to the glory of the Lord, these words brought with it hope that broke free the hearer from the oppression they were bound in.

In the picture of the yeast, the yeast reflects the small and relatable truth of who God is. When the truth of God and His kingdom begin to permeate the heart and life of the hearer, the transformation begins small, maybe the need to abstain from lying or treat

my spouse with honor and respect. As that truth is “kneaded” or turned over in the mind of the hearer, the truth works through other areas of the hearer’s life. It works its way into other relationships, areas of management, other emotions until the truth works its way into every part and area of the hearer’s life. This is the way that the truth of God grows and matures in our lives. It starts small but continues to grow and expand as we wrestle with and seek to understand the depth, width, breadth and height of His Word.

REFLECTION

What small truth of the Lord are you currently wrestling with and turning over in your mind? What area of your life does this truth need to expand into?

In your life, how patient and willing are you to go through the process of kneading? What does the kneading process look like usually in your life?

The Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Value

Matthew 13:44-46

Week of August 31

SYNOPSIS

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure that was uncovered in a field. The one who uncovered the treasure goes and sells everything that he possesses in order to purchase the field. The kingdom is also like a merchant who finds a pearl of great value. He eagerly goes and sells every other pearl that he has in order to purchase the pearl of great value.

CHARACTERS

The Treasure Hidden in the Field: Relationship with God

The Pearl of Great Value: Relationship with God

The Man who Purchases the Field: A True Disciple of God

The Merchant: A True Disciple of God

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

To be a disciple of a respected rabbi was the pinnacle of “arriving” in the Jewish faith. Being the disciple of a rabbi came with respect, admiration and power. This position was reserved for individuals who had something to offer the rabbi. Those from wealthy families had a leg up on everyone else. Jesus speaks out against the quid pro quo convention that surrounded discipleship. Jesus presented devotion and surrender as the key factors necessary for true discipleship.

THE TRUTH

The Bible is full of examples of individuals who were willing to trade things of great value for immediate gratification. Esau traded his birthright, a third of his father's possessions and territory, for a single bowl of stew cooked by his brother. Martha traded her time with Jesus for the feeling of a job completed that comes with the preparations of a meal and cleaning of the house. While the gratification that was obtained was not inherently evil or in error, there is a finality that comes from our choices. Our choice to trade something of greater value for something of lesser worth will at a certain point, shape us into worshippers and followers of lesser things. Our lives will be shaped by the here and now and we will trade all that we have for something that will end up broken, faded and consumed.

The disciple of Jesus hears the truth and knows the worth and value of what has been offered. The true disciple of Christ hears the invitation to enter into a relationship with God, and they perceive accurately its value. The kingdom of God is a worthy investment. It is something, He is something worth the investment of all of me. The disciple of Christ is eager and willing to surrender anything and everything to take hold of this investment. The merchant did not look at his smaller pearls and mourn their selling because they were beautiful and of some value. No, the merchant sees every

pearl being sold as an investment to take hold of something of even greater value. In our walk with Christ, every sacrifice, every good deed, every moment of patience, every long-suffering trial is a worthy cost to take possession of our life-giving relationship with God.

REFLECTION

Are you responding to your relationship with God as an investment worth your current situation and circumstances? How so?

What are some lesser treasure that you struggle with surrendering for the greater treasure of a closer and more intimate walk with God?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

Jesus does not say to anyone, "I won't let you be my disciple." Jesus has made the invitation to all. You and I are the ones who tell ourselves that because I can not do this or stop doing that, I cannot be His disciple. He is the great prize available to us all.

The Growing Seed

Mark 4:26-29

Week of September 7

SYNOPSIS

The kingdom of God is like a seed scattered by a man. Even though the man does nothing intentionally to grow the seed, the seed sprouts and grows. All by itself, the stalk, then the head, followed by the full kernel, spring forth from the seed and produces a harvest for the man to reap.

CHARACTERS

The Seed Scattered: The Truth of the Kingdom of God

The Sower: Jesus and/or Sharers of the Gospel Truth

The Soil: The Hearts of the Hearers

The Maturing Plant: The Spiritual Transformation of the Hearer

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

In the first century, the kingdom of heaven was seen as being directly related to the kingdom of Israel. The popular opinion of the day was that the Messiah would come and restore the nation of Israel to be a world power as it had been in the time of David. Jesus' teaching of the kingdom of heaven as being like a seed challenged this perspective on the grandiose nature of the kingdom in the mind of the hearer. The kingdom starts small but full of potential. The kingdom was not being ushered in by an army with swords but rather by words taking root in the hearts of man and restructuring their very lives from followers of the world to children of heaven.

THE TRUTH

The seed is used in multiple parables to speak about the truth of Christ and to convey how that truth would respond as it took root in the hearts of the hearer. In this parable, take note that the sower is not so intentional about planting the seed. He just scatters it upon the soil. The picture is of the same intention as when you toss an old tomato plant out in the corner of the yard. Even though you do nothing specific to tend to the needs of the seed, the seed takes root. The maturing of the seed is not dependent upon the depth of knowledge by the sower nor the hearer in order for it to grow and mature. In other words, no matter your knowledge and understanding of religious things or even the whole council of the Lord, the truth of God has within it everything necessary to take root, grow and mature in willing soil that it will bear fruit ready for harvest. The truth of God is designed to reorder and reprioritize our lives in such a manner as to produce disciples of Christ. Just as a tomato seed has everything necessary to prioritize the production of tomatoes and not watermelons, the truth of the Christ has everything necessary to produce children of God. The sower must be faithful to scatter the truth and then be ready to harvest as the Lord and His truth operate just as He designed.

REFLECTION

Is the truth of God maturing and growing you into a disciple of Jesus? In what areas has His truth reorganized and reprioritized aspects of your life?

*Who are you scattering the seeds of the truth of Christ into the soil of their hearts?
What is holding you back?*

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

It is a life-changing picture that is presented by Jesus in this parable. The truth of Christ has the power to organize reality. Think of a seed. Within its outer shell, the seed is packed with tremendous potential. The power of this potential cracks the shell and releases roots that start to consume the dirt and all of its nutrients. From these roots, a stalk begins to spring forth followed by one leaf and then more until, from the seed, fruit begins to bud filled with more seeds. The seed has organized reality in a very specific and organized manner. The seed has produced from dirt, water and sunlight a very specific fruit, a fruit of the same kind as its beginnings. This is an apt picture of the power of the Word of God.

The Net

Matthew 13:47-50
Week of September 14

SYNOPSIS

The kingdom of heaven is like a net that has been put out to catch fish. The net entangles all kinds of fish and when it is full, the net is hauled into the boat. The fish are then sorted. The good fish are sorted into baskets for market and personal use. The bad fish are thrown away. In the same manner, the wicked and the righteous will be sorted in the final days.

CHARACTERS

The Net: The Kingdom of God

The Good Fish: The Righteous People of the Kingdom

The Bad Fish: The Wicked People of the World

The Fishermen: The Angels Who Sort the Righteous and Wicked

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

Just as it is today in every church, religious individuals have exhausted great time and energy to try and identify who will be in and who will be left outside of heaven. We have become consumed by the comparison game between ourselves and others in an attempt to show how we are more righteous than our neighbors. Jesus challenges this cultural convention of comparison through the parable of the net. People of all kinds are caught up in the net of the kingdom of heaven. It is only after the net has been full and hauled into the boat that the sorting begins. No fish are sorted in the net. The fish do not identify and sort themselves. This would be a futile endeavor...just as the comparison game is today.

THE TRUTH

God has made the invitation to all people to come and see and believe. The net has been cast wide to gather people from all walks of life, socioeconomic situations, backstories, backgrounds, ethnicities and more. The truth of Christ has been made available to all that their hearts may be convicted and may turn toward the Lord. The net has been cast to gather up all of these people into the kingdom of heaven. The parable states that the net remains open in the waters until it is full. Then, the net will be hauled into the boat. The invitation of the Lord has been made open to all until all who are called respond. When that day comes, all those in the kingdom will be brought before the Lord. There the righteous and the wicked will be separated. As I read this parable, I am struck with the truth that the net does not catch all of the fish in the lake. Only those who are entangled in the net are hauled out. This challenges our view of the sorting. The sorting depicted may not be all people. It seems more narrowly focused like those people who identify as part of the kingdom will be the ones in the net. The sorting is amongst the people who identify as a part of the kingdom, who believe themselves to be righteous. This reminds me to the parable of the weeds. It was not until the harvest that the weeds and the wheat would be separated so that none of the wheat would be lost in the plucking of the weeds. Here, the distinction seems to be

about those in the kingdom and those of the kingdom. Those of the kingdom bear the fruit of the Spirit and have surrendered to the Lord. Those in the kingdom have experienced the blessings of the Lord but turned their back on His fruit and refused to surrender to Him.

REFLECTION

How has the comparison game impacted your relationship with God and others?

What areas of your life are you still looking for the fruit of the Lord to show up? What areas are hard to surrender to His leadership?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

In Matthew 13:52, Jesus states, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old." The teachers of the law were lumped in as the bad fish who were tossed from the kingdom, but Jesus tells his hearers that everyone, even the teachers of the law are invited to repent and embrace the fullness of the gospel.

The Lost Sheep and Lost Coin

Matthew 18:10-14; Luke 15:3-10

Week of September 21

SYNOPSIS

In a series of parables that Jesus taught in response to questions about spending time with sinners and eating with them, Jesus taught about a man who owns a hundred sheep. When one of them wanders off, how does the man respond? He leaves the ninety-nine to go and find the one who has wandered. In the same posture, Jesus teaches also of a woman who has ten coins. When one goes missing, she searches her whole house with a lamp and broom to find the lost coin. In both cases, when the wayward sheep and coin have been found, the owner rejoices. In the same manner, Jesus states that the Lord and His angels celebrate when a wayward person is found in the Lord.

CHARACTERS

The Man and the Woman: The Lord

The Sheep and the Coins: Human Beings

The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin: Wayward Children of God

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

In Jesus' day, one of the most revolting things about the way that Jesus conducted himself was the amount of time that He spent conversing and eating with sinners (especially tax collectors and prostitutes). In that culture, who you chose to eat with said everything about your character. Similarly, in today's culture, the company that one keeps says much about who you are. Guilt by association as the phrase goes. Jesus shifts the perspective through these parables. Instead of judging one based on our understanding, Jesus gifts His hearers with insight into the Lord's perspective on wayward people and the rejoicing that He has when they repent and turn to Him.

THE TRUTH

Through the parables, Jesus took situations that were common place and used them to teach deep rooted cultural shifts in other areas of the hearer's life. In the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, the Lord uses the relatable circumstances of losing something of worth and value like a sheep and coin. As you hear the parable unfold, you are not only captured by the words, you are able to place yourself in the moment. You know what it is like to lose a coin or a sheep. You can feel the panic set in deep down in the pit of your stomach. Your heart skips a beat as you immediately begin to run through the scenarios of what you might do if you never find the lost item. Your palms and fingers begin to tingle and your legs fill with energy as you picture tearing your house upside down trying to find that which has been lost. When the lost item is found, you feel the relief that comes from its discovery. You recognize and celebrate with the man and woman in the story. Then Jesus closes the parable with, "In the same way, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." Immediately, you replay the emotions of the parable but through the lens of the Lord. Your heart is moved for a people, sinners who you previously despised, because you now see them through the lens of the Almighty. Your heart is not moved to action because you desire to rejoice

with the Lord as you had previously with the man and the woman who had found their lost item of worth and value. Suddenly, sinners are seen as holding the utmost worth and value because God sees them.

REFLECTION

Are there individuals or groups of people that you struggle with? What about them makes them difficult to love?

How does the Lord desire you to respond to these individuals? What needs to change to align your heart with God's?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

These parables give beautiful insight into the heart and the eyes of the Lord. Through much of my early church life, God seemed far away and removed. There were few things that I felt the Lord and I could relate on apart from my sin and failures. Here, Jesus gives us a glimpse into God's desire for His creation and even invites in shared celebration with the Lord over the repentance of a little one or sinner.

The Unforgiving Servant

Matthew 18:23-35
Week of September 28

SYNOPSIS

When asked about forgiveness, Jesus told a parable about a king who was settling accounts. When a man who owed the king 10,000 bags of gold and was unable to pay it, the king ordered that his family be sold to pay the debt. The man pleaded with the king to be patient with him. Filled with pity for the man, the king cancelled the man's debt. As the man left, he comes across a servant who owes him 100 silver coins. When the servant would not repay his debt, the man had the servant thrown into prison. When news returned to the king of what the man had done, the king called the man in and rebuked him. The debt the king had cancelled was many times over the amount of the servant owed and yet the man was unwilling to forgive after having experienced the forgiveness of a far greater debt.

CHARACTERS

The King: The Lord Almighty

The Man: Those who are Unwilling to Forgive

The Servant: Those who have Wronged Us

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

The convention of the day in regards to the forgiveness of others was difficult in the first-century Jewish culture. Forgiveness between individuals required the one who offended to acknowledge their wrong, give a sincere apology and make amends with the offended party. Until these things occurred in a manner that was satisfactory to the offended party, forgiveness was withheld. Jesus' response to Peter when asked about how many times an offended party should forgive, Jesus responded with seventy-seven times. The posture of forgiveness with others should be seen in response to the forgiveness that we have experienced at the hand of the Father.

THE TRUTH

Forgiveness is a difficult and complex concept to comprehend and is even more difficult to walk through in relationship with others. Forgiveness is counterintuitive. Jesus paves the way to shift one's posture into the posture of kingdom living. Jesus moves the hearer to perceive their relationship from a heavenly perspective. The man who was in debt to the king was so far in debt that he would never be able to repay it. When confronted with the consequence of not being able to repay, his wife and children being sold to repay the debt, the man pleaded with the king to be patient with him and he would repay everything. This was an impossible ask. There was no amount of time and patience that would be available for this man to ever make amends and repay the debt. The king responds to the man's plea by giving the man both grace and mercy. The king does not do what is within his rights as the indebted one, selling the man's family to repay the debt, showing the man mercy, and the king also shows the man grace by giving him what he does not deserve by cancelling the unpaid debt altogether. Could you imagine having such a debt, 10,000 bags of gold, being forgiven? This is the debt that the Lord has forgiven for all of us. We are in debt to Him with our

very lives because of our sin (Romans 6:23). The Lord has shown us mercy and grace in response to our debt. Instead of taking our lives in payment for our debt, the Lord has accepted Christ's life in our stead, covering us in mercy. The Lord also lavishes grace upon us as He gives to us eternal life and a reconciled relationship with Him. This is the depth, width, height and breadth of what the Lord has lavished on us. In light of the loftiness of His forgiveness of us, Jesus states that our ability to forgive others finds its foundation in the forgiveness that we have been shown rather than the worthiness of the offender or his actions to be forgiven.

REFLECTION

Why is forgiveness difficult and complex to bestow upon others?

What have you learned about the depth of God's forgiveness that He has shown to you?

The Two Sons

Matthew 21:28-32

Week of October 5

SYNOPSIS

A father has two sons to whom he asked to come and work in the vineyard. When asked, the first son told his father that he would not go and work, but after a while, the son went to the vineyard as asked. The second son responded to his father's request saying that he would go and work but chose not to follow through and work in the vineyard. Which of the two sons did as the father wanted? The first son who went and worked in the vineyard.

CHARACTERS

The Father: The Lord

The First Son: Those who have Sinned but Repent

The Second Son: Those who Identify as Followers but Do Not Repent

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

The culture of the first century was very similar to today where individuals worth in society was wrapped up in the labels and titles that each individual held. This was especially true in the area of religion. The divisions between Jew and Gentile divided towns and cities. The titles and positions you held, even your occupation, determined the rights that you would be given and even the tables that you would be invited to at meals. Jesus pushes back against these cultural labels in this parable. The one who was exalted was the son who did as his father asked over the one who verbally acknowledged but did not follow up with deed.

THE TRUTH

Throughout His ministry, Jesus stands at odds with the teachers of the law. The Pharisees and Sadducees had become consumed with going about town and condemning others who were not acting in accordance with the Law as they understood it. The hypocrisy that Christ stood against was that these very same teachers of the law were doing the very same things that they condemned others about but were absolved from judgment because of their title and position as Pharisee. Jesus was condemned for the time that he spent with those who did not hold desirable titles or positions like tax collectors and prostitutes, but we are given account after account of repentance from these individuals as they received Jesus' teaching. Zacchaeus was a tax collector who, after meeting Jesus, returned every dollar that he took from others plus interest. He repented and turned to follow the Lord. On the other hand, the times where Jesus eats at the homes of Pharisees, the teachers of the law respond not with repentance but rather a desire to kill Jesus. The question this parable brings to light is, "What are your fruits?" If you are walking in righteousness, your life should be bearing godly fruit. If you are not bearing godly fruit, then you are not walking in righteousness, even if you hold a title or belong to a church.

REFLECTION

What kind of fruit do you see in your life?

What place in how you treat others does title and position play?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

There were few professions more despised by the religious populace than tax collectors and prostitutes. Tax collectors were reviled because they were seen as traitors by the Jewish nation. They were collecting funds from their own people to fuel the empire that was oppressing them. Also, tax collectors' wages consisted of whatever they were able to collect above what Rome required for taxes. The people saw them as thieves and traitors. Prostitutes were immoral and in violation of the law. Because their professions openly displayed the ways that they were living in violation of the Law, they were reviled by the religious leaders. Their violations though were also being done by the religious leaders who stole from the people by exorbitantly charging for sacrifices outside the temple and rejecting the sacrifices in favor of the animals provided at the temple market.

The Tenants

Matthew 21:33-44; Mark 12:1-11; Luke 20:9-18

Week of October 12

SYNOPSIS

In the parable of the tenants, a landowner planted a vineyard and placed in it everything that was necessary to care for the vineyard. The landowner then rented the vineyard to some farmers to care for and tend to. When the harvest came, the landowner sent servants to collect his portion of the fruit. When the servants arrived, the farmers beat and killed them. The landowner sent more servant who were treated the same way. Then the landowner sent his son. The farmers took and killed him as well hoping to become take the son's inheritance. When the owner returns to the vineyard, what will he do to those tenants?

CHARACTERS

The Landowner: The Lord God

The Tenants: The Nation of Israel

The Servants: The Prophets of God

The Son: Jesus Christ

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

The people of Israel throughout their history, especially the religious leaders in the first century, believed that they were God's chosen people set apart from the rest of the world because of their divine promise. They had lost sight of the Giver of the divine promise and the reason for setting the nation apart. The Lord had called Israel out of captivity and the wilderness to be a light to the other nation of how to live for the Lord (Isaiah 49:6). Israel did not succeed in this calling. In this parable, Jesus ends with a question of what should be done with the people who were invited in care and tend to what the vineyard but failed to deliver the harvest and respect the owner. Jesus leaves the nation to respond in their own judgment.

THE TRUTH

The Kingdom of God in its most basic and all-encompassing understanding is the rule of God over everything. Everything was brought forth from His hand thus He is the ruler over all. There is another level of understanding that also falls under the Kingdom of God that speaks specifically in regards to how people will participate in the kingdom. The Old and New Testament give testimony to the rule of God being given to people. God invited His creation to participate in His kingdom through partnership in kingdom rule. Moses was invited to partner with the Lord in kingdom leadership as he exercised the power of God. The nation of Israel was invited to participate through a set of institutions and rituals by which they received and participated in the power of God. This partnership between God and Israel was to proclaim the invitation to take part in the kingdom to all other nations. Israel turned their back on this partnership and began to operate in God's stead as rulers of the kingdom. In judgment, the Lord would remove Israel from this position as heralded of the kingdom and give it to the church. No longer would a single nation bear the responsibility of holding this invitation, but rather Jews and Gentiles whose hearts are ready to hear and see will be invited to take part in partnership with God in kingdom rule and participation in His power, the Holy Spirit.

REFLECTION

How does the understanding of salvation in Christ being the means to an invitation to participate in kingdom rule with God impact how you live/with for Christ today?

Do you find yourself taking for granted the kingdom of God? What needs to change to prevent taking it for granted?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

Jesus closes this parable by asking the crowd how the owner should respond when he returns to the vineyard. The crowd consists of Jewish believers and religious leaders who reply in judgment against the tenants. They only see righteous vengeance against the tenants to be the appropriate response of the landowner. "Bring those wretches to a wretched end." I wonder how their hearts felt in the minutes, hours or days that followed when some of them who had ears to hear realized that they were the tenants in the vineyard and the Lord was the landowner.

The Great Banquet

Matthew 22:1-14; Luke 14:16-24

Week of October 19

SYNOPSIS

The kingdom of heaven is like a great banquet prepared by the master of the house. He sends out his servants to tell those who had been invited that the banquet was ready. Those invited responded with excuses as to why they would not come to the banquet. The master of the house became angry and sent out his servants to go out into the streets and invite the poor, crippled, blind and lame. When there was still room, the servants were told to go and invite all that they come across. Many are invited, but few are chosen.

CHARACTERS

The Master of the House: The Lord Almighty

The Servants: The Prophets and the Word of Truth

The Invited Guests: The Religious Leaders and Israel

The Poor, Crippled, Lame and Blind: The Outcasts and the Gentiles

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

In the Gospel of Luke, this parable is shared at the house of a prominent Pharisee. Around the table, Jesus noticed that those who had been invited were consumed trying to sit in the positions of honor at the table. Everyone who had been invited to the table was most interested in how they would be perceived and how this dinner invitation might benefit them later. Before sharing the parable, Jesus spent time making comment about their behavior and the inconsistencies that their behavior had with the priorities that being religious leaders of the Lord should have been. When one man at the table cried, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the Kingdom of God", Jesus took the opportunity to share about the Great Banquet that would be set in the kingdom.

THE TRUTH

The parable of the Great Banquet speaks directly to the heart of those who hear the truth of the kingdom of heaven and respond with excuses and reasons to not respond in affirmation and acceptance. In the parable, the Master of the house sends the invitation well in advance, but those invited did not respond. When the day arrived, he sends out his servants to inform the invited that all of the preparations are ready and to come join the feast. Those who had been invited make excuses that reveal the true intent of their heart. I have bought a field and must go and see it is an illogical excuse. Why did you not examine the field before you bought it and will not the field be there after the feast. The same illogical reasoning can be applied to the excuse of the oxen. What is revealed is that the hearts of the invited have no interest in coming. They have grown hard to the invitation of the Lord. So the Lord will not waste His feast nor His invitation. He will invite those who were on the fringes, who were unseen and unwanted by the guests who thought they were too good or busy to respond to the invitation. He will bestow upon them the place of honor and the celebration of the chosen. This parable serves as a warning to those who think that they are set apart because they are invited. All are invited, but those who respond with acceptance and affirmation to the invitation are chosen.

REFLECTION

How have you responded to the invitation of the Lord?

What does it look like in your life to respond with acceptance and affirmation to the invitation of the Lord?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

The parable of the Great Banquet speaks about not missing out on the kingdom. This is a call for reflection to those within the church as much as it is to those outside the church. In Revelation 3:20, Jesus states, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." In this, Jesus is inviting those in the church to let Him in, but those in the church may be so busy doing other things, even good things, that they might miss the one thing that is most necessary. Like Martha missed out on what was most important as she was busy good things in preparation for a meal, we can miss the opportunity to sit at the feet of Jesus and commune with the Author of our Faith and the Holder of our Hope.

The Ten Virgins

Matthew 25:1-13

Week of October 26

SYNOPSIS

When the time of the kingdom of heaven has come, it will be like ten maidens who have taken their lamps to light the way as they escort the bridegroom to the wedding feast. The maidens are signified by two differing descriptions: the foolish ones took with them no extra oil, but the wise ones took oil in jars along with their lamps. When the bridegroom was delayed in his arrival, the maidens fell asleep. The announcement was made that the bridegroom had finally arrived and the maidens arose and readied their lamps. The foolish maidens realized that their lamps were growing dim from lack of oil. They ask for some of the oil brought by the wise maidens. The wise maidens are concerned with not having enough oil for both themselves and another without running out of oil before arriving at the feast. The wise maidens tell the foolish ones to go and buy some oil and return. While they are gone buying oil, the bridegroom arrives and the wise maidens escort the bridegroom to the feast. When the foolish maidens finally arrive, the doors to the wedding feast are closed and they are left out.

CHARACTERS

The Bridegroom: Jesus Christ, the Son

The Wise Maidens: Those who are Watchful and Ready

The Foolish Maidens: Those who are Not Ready and Watchful

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

The parable of the ten maidens reveals our heart toward our individual responsibilities in our relationship with the Lord. The cultural convention placed an increased emphasis on being a part of the nation of Israel over adherence in the Law and faith in the Lord. The parable of the ten maidens placed the emphasis on the heart posture of readiness and the onus on personal responsibility in our relationship instead of relying on the faith of others.

THE TRUTH

In the parable of the ten maidens, the maidens are charged with serving as the welcoming crew for the wedding party. They stand at the ready to escort the bridegroom (and possibly his bride) into the wedding feast. Their position is centered around readiness for their responsibility begin when the bridegroom arrives. Take notice that all ten maidens are invited to take up the call and fulfill the responsibility. The emphasis of this parable is upon being watchful and ready. Often, this parable has been seen in light of the second coming of Jesus and the wise and foolish maidens are seen as those who have and have not accepted the invitation of salvation, but in the context of the sequence of parables in Matthew 24 and 25, Jesus is seemingly revealing to us the posture of our heart when the master is away. How do we respond to what the Lord has called of us when His presence is not readily seen? How will the Lord find His temple when He returns home? In the parable of the ten maidens, there are those who are focused on being ready and watchful. They are distracted by other things and they fail to be prepared for what has been called of them. Their life has remained unaffected by the message of the kingdom and their life remains disordered so when opportunity

arises to serve the Lord and be the light of the kingdom, they are not ready to respond and escort their party to the kingdom.

REFLECTION

In what ways are you currently being watchful, ready and prepared for the calling of the Lord?

In what areas does your life need to be reordered or reorganized to make room for you to respond to the calling of the Lord?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

The allusion of the parable of the ten maidens to the second coming of Jesus does hold merit especially in the final verses. When the foolish maidens protest at the closed door asking for entry, they are met with the response, "truly I tell you, I do not know you." This harkens back to Matthew 7:23. The call to readiness for the Son of Man will come like a thief in the night is a repeated call in Scripture regarding Jesus' return.

The Talents

Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27

Week of November 2

SYNOPSIS

The kingdom of heaven is like a master going on a journey who calls his servants and entrusts them with his wealth while he is gone. To one servant he gave 5 sums of wealth, to another 2 sums, and to a third, he gave one sum. When the master returned, he called for his servants. From the one who was given 5 sums of wealth, he brought forth 5 more sums. From the one who was given 2 sums, 2 more sums were brought forth. The master responded with joy. "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's joy." From the one who was given 1 sum, the same sum was returned with the excuse that the servant was afraid of the hardness of his master. The master rebukes the servant for not putting the sum to work. He took the sum from the servant and cast him out.

CHARACTERS

The Master: The Lord God

The Servant Given 5 Sums: A Faithful Follower of Christ

The Servant Given 2 Sums: A Faithful Follower of Christ

The Servant Given 1 Sum: An Unfaithful Follower of Christ

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

In Luke's gospel, this parable is shared around the table at the house of Zacchaeus, the tax collector. Jesus is once again eating at the home of a sinner. Zacchaeus, when he heard Jesus was coming to eat with him, invited all of his friends, who were also sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes. They heard the message of Christ and they repented. Jesus shares this parable to show them the worth of their faithfulness. These individuals would have had no position in society. They would bring no prominence or notoriety to Jesus or His message. Jesus shares in the parable that what matters is not how much you have but your faithfulness with what has been given.

THE TRUTH

Like the parable of the ten maidens, this parable reveals the heart of the servant to be faithful while the master is away. The master leaves the servants with a charge and purpose, take what I have given you and put it to work while he is gone. When the master returns, he sends for his servants to receive the report on how they were faithful with what they had been given. In the report from the first two servants, they were faithful to follow the master's instructions and they brought back the master's investment plus. Take notice of the master's response. "You have been faithful with a few things." The standard or expectation of the master was for them to be faithful with what they had been given. It is easy to focus on the amount of return, but Jesus is clear in His words that the focus is on their faithfulness with what they have been given that results in the servants sharing in the master's joy. God has given us all time, talents and treasures. We all have different amounts of each. The Lord has called us while He tarries with His return to be faithful with what He has given to us. In doing so, when He returns, we will share in His joy. The final servant though was not faithful with what he

had been given. He hid the sum that had been given to him. His excuse reveals his heart. "I knew that you were a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed, so I was afraid." The servant thought that he knew the master, but he had the wrong view of the master. Many have the wrong view of God. They know Him as hard and demanding. They live their life consumed on not falling short and being able to say that they have done nothing wrong according to the letter of the law. Sadly, they miss actually knowing Him at all. Their lives are not lived in faith but rather fear.

REFLECTION

How does this parable shape your view of what it means to be faithful to the Lord?

Reread the parable in Matthew and Luke. What is the Lord calling you to be faithful with?

The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:29-37

Week of November 9

SYNOPSIS

A man is traveling home from Jerusalem when he is attacked and left for dead by robbers on the road. While he lay along the road, a priest passed by, and seeing the man, moved to the other side of the road to pass. Later, a Levite came across the man and also passed by on the other side of the road. Finally, a Samaritan man came upon the man on the road. Taking pity on the man, the Samaritan bandaged his wounds and then took him by donkey to an inn to care for him. The Samaritan paid for the man's care at the inn, even promising to return to cover any extra expenses.

CHARACTERS

The Samaritan: A True Neighbor; A True Follower of God

The Priest: One who Fit the Role of Neighbor but Chose Not to Be

The Levite: One who Fit the Role of Neighbor but Chose Not to Be

The Man: One in Need

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

Jesus was being asked what must be done to inherit eternal life. Jesus instructed the man to Love God and Love Your Neighbor. Upon hearing this, the one questioning Jesus reveals his heart in his questioning. He wanted to know who his neighbor was in an effort to justify himself. Based on Jesus' definition of neighbor, the man would be able to respond with confidence that he loved his own people, family, friends, likeminded individuals, fellow countrymen and maybe even his physical neighbors well. Jesus pushed the definition of neighbor by filling the script on the man.

THE TRUTH

The Jews despised Samaritans. Samaritans were traitorous, blasphemous half-breeds in the eyes of Jews in the first century. When Jesus tells the parable, he depicts a very relatable scenario to the hearers. Traveling in those days was dangerous, especially if you are alone. Everyone knew people who had been robbed and beaten, if not killed, along the road. To tell of a man who was traveling back from Jerusalem was also relatable as every Jew made at least three pilgrimages a year to the Holy City. In the parable, Jesus states that a priest and a Levite pass by the man. These are fellow countrymen. Who else would be considered your neighbor than a fellow Jew? On top of their ethnic commonality, the priest and the Levite were men of God. The priest was in charge of leading the people in the worship of God and the Levite tribe was set apart to aid in the worship of the Lord. These were men who were well acquainted with the Law and were charged with keeping it in its fullness. Whether it was because they were caught up in the fulfillment of their divine duties or some other reasoning, they both pass by the man failing to lend a hand of care. When Jesus introduces a Samaritan into the story, the hearer were likely taken aback. Even worse, the Samaritan becomes the hero of the story as he lends aid to the man. Jesus concludes the parable by asking the hearers who was the neighbor to the man. In this character exchange, the hearers standard for neighbor was turned on end. The neighbor we are to love as ourselves is the one that has need in our path, no matter our prejudice, views or objections. In this

teaching, Jesus displays the outworking of the Word of the kingdom. When we take hold of the kingdom, our life is reorganized in such a way that we begin to see beyond our cultural divisions. We see with the compassionate heart that God Himself possesses and reveals to His children. The parable of the Good Samaritan is the proclamation of how the kingdom mind shapes our relationships with humanity. It orders how we see both believer and unbeliever alike, friend and enemy, like-minded and inharmonious people. It leads us to seek the grace of God necessary to truly love our neighbor as we love ourselves, or more completely put, as God loves us.

REFLECTION

Why is it so difficult to love others as you love yourself?

How has this parable reshaped your understanding of how the kingdom of God reorders your relationships with others?

The Rich Fool

Luke 12:16-21

Week of November 16

SYNOPSIS

A rich man finds that his field has yielded an abundant harvest, more than his silos could hold. The man makes plans to tear down his barns and build bigger ones to store the surplus so that in his abundance he will be able to take it easy and live life to its fullest. The Lord responded to the man, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Who then will get what you have prepared for yourself?"

CHARACTERS

Rich Man: The One who Stores Up Things for Themselves but is Not Rich Toward God

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

No matter how much or how little we have, we often respond to our current circumstances with "the grass is always greener" heart posture. If we have little, having more would make us happier and solve our problems. If we have much, having more would provide greater security and freedom to enjoy what we have amassed. The deceitfulness of riches tells you that your life is not what it should be and can not reach its potential without more.

THE TRUTH

Jesus is approached by someone from the crowd asking him to intervene in a dispute with their brother over an inheritance. Jesus pushes back as to the reasoning to seek out Jesus to stand in the position of arbiter in this dispute. The individual from the crowd is seeking to gain the voice of one with authority, a great teacher, to justify their position in this inheritance dispute. Jesus warns them to watch out for the effects that come with chasing abundance. To illustrate this warning, Jesus shares this parable. The parable of the Rich Fool is about our relationship to riches, possessions and gains. The issue is not the possession of those things, but the effect that these pursuits have on our heart. The rich man in this parable is not considered a fool because he was rich and had abundance but because his riches were the aim of his heart. Riches have the potential to deceive us about our lives. Riches tempt us into thinking that our lives are our riches. The rich man in the story has received the tremendous blessing of an overly abundant harvest. Fit with this predicament of having an abundance more than he could store, the man makes plans to house his abundance. The rich man was being sensible in response to his circumstances, but in the next breath, he reveals the posture of his heart. He spoke to himself saying that he could take it easy and eat, drink and be merry. Again, there is nothing inherently incorrect in his response. The deceit comes though in where his faith is placed. He can sit back and take it easy because what he has amassed will provide for him. In his heart, his riches had taken the place of the Lord as provider and sustainer. His faith was in the lasting ability of his riches over the provision of the hand of God. The response of God is to show the folly of this posture. Riches have a very limited reach in provision. Like the saying, money can't buy me love, riches have a limited scope of provision and life is about far more than riches could ever be able to provide.

REFLECTION

Describe your relationship with riches. How do riches affect your daily life?

Jesus ends the parable with a call to be rich toward God. What does Jesus mean by being rich toward God?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

The deceit of riches is an intriguing phrase. The pursuit of riches often leads to askew views of life, the world and others. In the Old Testament, the possession of riches was a sign that you had the favor of the Lord. Wealth made many believe that they were in right and good standing with the Lord even though their actions and heart failed to follow God with any intentionality. The deceit of riches also skews our views in relationships. Riches make people assume they are wise and clever, and results in them believing they are better than those who are without.

The Barren Fig Tree

Luke 13:6-9

Week of November 23

SYNOPSIS

A man has a fig tree growing in his vineyard. For three years, the fig tree has failed to produce fruit. The owner of the vineyard instructs the caretaker to cut down the tree so it no longer will drain the nutrients of the soil while failing to produce fruit. The caretaker pleads with the owner to give the tree one more year of growth. The caretaker commits to fertilize and give special attention to the fig tree. If it does not bear fruit the next year, he will cut it down.

CHARACTERS

The Owner of the Vineyard: The Lord God

The Fig Tree: The Nation of Israel

The Caretaker: Jesus

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

This parable follows a series of questions presented to Jesus in regards to the punishment of the Lord befalling those who have sinned greatly against him. There was great emphasis placed upon the judgment of the Lord. The fear of God's judgment held many captive and paralyzed in their faith as they sought to not violate any laws and provoke the wrath of God. Jesus reveals to His hearers the depth of the Lord's mercy.

THE TRUTH

Jesus is confronted by the some in the crowd as He was teaching on interpreting the times. These individuals were sharing with Jesus about reports they had heard of some Galileans who were making a sacrifice to the Lord and were killed by order of Pilate. This possibly could have occurred during Passover when laity was permitted to slaughter their own animals. If the Galileans were put to death by the sword while in they were in the process of slaughtering their animal, the statement could be made that their blood was mixed with the sacrifice thus defiling the sacrifice. The heart of those sharing was to raise anger against Rome and Pilate for such a demandable act against the Lord. There were many who saw the promised Messiah only in the light of politics. They believed that the Messiah would come and overthrow Rome and instill an earthly reign for the house of David.

Jesus responds by reminding the crowd of the heart of God. All who have turned their back on the Lord's commands and failed to trust in Him were engaging in demandable acts before the Lord. The posture of standing in righteous judgment against Rome was hypocritical when the nation of Israel was equally in violation of the Law of God. Jesus tells them to repent that they might not perish as well. He then tells the story of the barren fig tree. The nation of Israel had failed to be faithful to the Lord in the age of Moses, Joshua and the Judges. They continued to be unfaithful in the age of the kings and remained unfaithful after their return from captivity. There was no sign that the nation would be faithful in any other age to come. The Lord would be righteous in His

judgment to cut them down for failing to bear the fruit of faithfulness. Jesus stands in the role of the caretaker and asks for the Lord's mercy to give the nation one more age, the age of Christ and the church, to be faithful. He would fertilize them with the Holy Spirit and leave them with His teachings. If they could not be faithful in this age, then their judgment is secured. Will they repent before the age comes to an end?

REFLECTION

Those in the crowd were quick to proclaim the Lord's judgment upon others. Why are we quick to proclaim God's wrath and judgment upon others?

What does the picture of God relenting, showing mercy and being patient in His judgment reveal to you about the character of God? How does that effect how you relate to God?

The Wedding Feast

Luke 14:7-14

Week of November 30

SYNOPSIS

Jesus shares two sides of the same story. When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not be swift to seat yourself in the position of honor for you may not be the most honored guest invited to the feast and this humiliated when asked to take a lower seat in favor for a more honored guest. Instead seat yourself in the lowest place that your host may call you forth to take the more honored seat in the presence of his guests. From the other perspective, Jesus states that when you invite people to attend a feast, do not only invite those who will invite you back or be able to repay you for your hospitality. Instead, invite those who are less fortunate and who can not repay you thus you will be repaid by the One who loves each of these when you stand before Him.

CHARACTERS

The Host: Those who Saw Others For What They Had to Offer

The Invited Guest: Those who Saw Themselves as Greater Than

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

This parable spoke in challenge of the hearts of the cultural elite who were present at the meal in the house of a prominent Pharisee. Unlike many of the other parables that drew from everyday life circumstances to connect the hearts of the hearer to the truth of God, in this situation, Jesus pulls from their present circumstances and even the actions of individuals occurring right in front of them to reveal the truth and the condition of people's hearts. It was like a parable telling itself in real time. Jesus challenged the cultural hierarchy and the prevailing heart posture of exaltation and greater than that accompanied the elite.

THE TRUTH

Jesus has been invited to a meal at the house of a prominent Pharisee and the meal unfolds with an overwhelming air of judgment and condemnation against Jesus and His ministry. Jesus takes this opportunity to challenge the views of the cultural elite as He heals a man infirmed on the Sabbath in their presence. Jesus challenged their perspective on acceptable work that could be done on the Sabbath as He healed the man. As the dinner progressed, Jesus took note that people were jockeying for the seats of greatest honor, those closest to the host as the meal prepared to be served. Everyone who was in attendance at this meal was seeking to serve themselves and leverage the meal into future societal gains. Jesus spoke against this heart posture as He told the parable. He warns His hearers of the condition of our heart to see ourselves more highly than we really are. Imagine sitting in the seat of prominence for as you look around the room, no one is as highly esteemed as you. What would happen if when the host came to sit at the table they looked to their left and upon seeing you, not their invited guest of highest esteem, the host asked for you to move so that the one to whom the seat was intended for could take their rightful place. What humiliation. Instead Jesus advised that we should think more humbly of ourselves, being slow to cast judgment on others, and take our place in the lowest seat. When the host arrives and fails to see us sitting near to him, he will seek us out in order to give us his intended

seat of prominence. In this parable, Jesus challenges the hearts of the hearers to see themselves with humbleness and grace. The host is the authority that deems the criteria for the position of honor. This is especially true in the kingdom of heaven. The Lord is the host of heaven. He has authority over the place of honor. Similarly to when the disciples argued on the road as to who would be the greatest in the kingdom, Jesus responds, "Whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom" (Matthew 18:4).

REFLECTION

Why are we so prone to desire to exalt ourselves in the presence of others? What is gained from this?

Why is it so difficult to sit in a lower position than we believe that we deserve? What is lost to us when we choose to exalt ourselves?

The Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11-32

Week of December 7

SYNOPSIS

There was a father who had two sons. The younger son asks the father to give him his inheritance so that he might go and live his life. The father gave the son what he asked and the son left the father home and went to go live his life to the fullest. After a short while, the son's inheritance had been spent and the son was left alone in a far off land. He took a job watching pigs and his hunger led him to desire the slop the pigs consumed. Coming to his senses, the son turns to return home and plead with his father to give him a job as a hired hand. While the son was a far ways off, the father eyes him and comes running. He embraces his son and instructs his servants to clothe his son with the royal robes and prepare a feast for his son who was lost has been found. The older son, who had been working in the field, scolds his father for welcoming the younger son home with such fanfare and festivity. The older son had been faithful to his father and worked hard for him. When pushed as to why the father would celebrate the younger son after wasting all the father had given him, the father told the older son that the reason for celebration was that he who was lost has been found.

CHARACTERS

The Father: God, Our Father

The Younger Son: Those who have yet to Repent

The Older Son: The Pharisees

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

The parable of the prodigal son challenges the importance that we place on possessions and people against the value that the Lord places upon them. The teachers of the law had helped instill a hierarchy that saw people and possessions as having value based on what could be gained from them. Jesus pushed back and placed the appropriate value on all people, especially those who repented and returned to the Lord.

THE TRUTH

The parable of the prodigal son is told in conjunction with the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. All of these parables speak about the value to the Father of that which is lost. The Lord holds His creation with great value. He sees not only the worth of each individual in the here and now, but He knows full well their potential. He loves each of us as His creation and longs for us to enter into His Kingdom and be called children of God. The contrast to this view of value is seen in the response by the older son to the father's celebration. The older son could not see past the wealth that had been squandered. He would have been more pleased had the money returned and not his brother. When we read the story of the older son, we are often sympathetic. We see ourselves as the hard workers who have been faithful and not received the same reward and praise. This heart posture is what led to the fall of Satan and the angels. The truth of the parable is that we are all prodigals. We have all wandered and squandered the good blessings of the Lord. Our position as a restored child of God only came by the

grace and mercy bestowed upon us by the Father because of the value that He placed on finding us when we had been lost. When we recognize that we are all prodigals, our heart posture toward one another shifts and we reflect the love of the Lord over the judgment of our entitlement.

REFLECTION

Why is it difficult to see ourselves as the prodigal? What stigma associated with being a prodigal becomes the obstacle?

What is lost when we take the posture of the older son and remain unable to celebrate those who have been found?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

We are never so like the Lord than when we rejoice over the salvation of sinners. Our rejoicing is a proclamation of the success and faithfulness of the Lord's pursuing. Our celebration is the giving of testimony of how our Savior has overcome. In the same vain, we are never so like Satan than when we despise those who are repentant and think ourselves superior to them. What deceit pride fools our hearts with that we would despise salvation.

The Dishonest Manager

Luke 16:1-9

Week of December 14

SYNOPSIS

There was a rich man who hired a manager to oversee his accounts. When accusations of waste were brought against the manager, the man asked for an accounting. In fear that he was to be fired, the manager called in those who owed the man and slashed their debts. The rich man applauded the manager for his shrewdness.

CHARACTERS

The Rich Man: The Lord

The Manager: Humanity

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

The parable of the dishonest manager is an unconventional parable in that the hero of the story is no hero at all. The dishonest manager is just dishonest, but in his shrewdness, he teaches the hearers a lesson in preparation and priority. The culture of the day was consumed by the here and now and indulging in every pleasure without thought of tomorrow. This parable pulls the hearer back to see a fuller picture of life.

THE TRUTH

In the parable of the dishonest manager, the dishonesty of the manager becomes apparent from the start. He is crooked and deserving of what is to come. When the rich man calls the manager to make an accounting of his management, the manager knows that the books will not balance. He quickly begins to scramble for what to do next. He is not cut out for manual labor and too proud to beg so he uses his authority to cut the debts of those who owed the rich man. The desire or hope of the manager is that after he is fired, those that owed the rich man would look upon his new position of unemployment and look favorably upon him. His hope was that in this hour of need, they would remember what he had done for them and they would take him in and care for his needs until he could find something else to do.

This parable is strange in that the close of the parable, where the lesson to be learned is often placed, it seems as though the dishonest manager is praised by the Lord. Upon closer examination, the dishonest manager is not applauded for his actions nor his character. Instead, it is the perception of what was to come and the willingness of the manager to act that is applauded, his shrewdness. The manager foresaw his firing and began to make preparations for what was to come. Jesus tells this parable so that his hearers would take note of their circumstances eternally and make preparation. "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves so when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." In a world so wrapped up in the here and now, it is easy to miss that all of this is temporary. The Scripture is clear that there is coming an accounting for the management of each of our lives. How will we respond when the Master calls for our accounting? Jesus is pointing His hearers to see this coming reality and to make preparations now. What is your worldly wealth worth when the world comes to an end? It is only worth that which you were able to use it for now that holds value in eternity. With this parable Jesus shifts the heart of the hearer to prioritize our possessions today in light of what can be won for eternity.

REFLECTION

Are you prepared to give an accounting before the Lord of your management?

Where is your priority: In the here and now or with eternity? How is that reflected in your management of what God has given to you?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

I challenge you to pause and take time to truly consider the accounting that you will give for your management. Are you ready to stand before the Lord? Do you truly know whose you are? Is there certainty or doubt and hoping? Jesus was very clear in His teaching that we are headed to this accounting and we will all have to stand and be ready to respond. It is not a matter of if but when. Are you prepared? If not, please let us talk about it.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16:19-31

Week of December 21

SYNOPSIS

There was a rich man who lived in luxury. At his gate laid a beggar named Lazarus. The time came when both the rich man and Lazarus died. Lazarus was brought to Abraham's side with the Lord while the rich man was condemned into Hades. The rich man looked up from his torment and saw Lazarus. He cried out to Abraham to have pity and send Lazarus to give him a drop of water. Abraham told the rich man that was not possible so the rich man pleaded with Abraham to send Lazarus to his family to warn them to not end up in the same fate as he has. Abraham responds that his family has the words of Moses and the prophets. The rich man continues to plead stating that if Lazarus rose from the dead, surely his family would listen. Abraham replies that if they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not listen to a man who has risen from the dead.

CHARACTERS

The Rich Man: Those whose Salvation is in the World

Lazarus: Those whose Salvation is in the Lord

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

In the first century, the culture believed that your riches were a sign of your favor with the Lord. If you were rich, you must be a good person with a rich heart and thus you will have a rich eternal life. Likewise, to be poor or infirmed was a sign of God's judgment and likely signified unrepentant sin by yourself or your family. Those who were without in this life would likely be without in the next. Jesus challenges this view in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

THE TRUTH

In these series of parables told in Luke, Jesus is progressively challenging the current cultural view of what is good and real and shifting His hearers to perceive goodness and reality from the perspective of the eternal. What is truly good and what is truly real is what is true and good in the spiritual realm, in the presence of the Almighty. The rich man had everything in this life. He lived in luxury and splendor. He dressed in the finest things and had great abundance. In contrast, Lazarus had nothing. He longed for the scraps that might fall from the rich man's table. One was physically wealthy while the other was physically poor. In death, a new contrast is presented. Lazarus dies and is rushed to Abraham's side. He is ushered into eternity by angels. The rich man dies and is buried, not just physically but also spiritually. He is ushered into Hades to endure torment. There is no relief from his anguish, not even a drop of water to cool his tongue. Jesus is giving His hearers an understanding of the ultimate value system. The things of this world are temporary but the things of the next are eternal. As the saying goes, death is the great equalizer. In death, the validity of our value system is put to the test. Jesus is placing the emphasis on our spiritual wealth. Do you know the Father and is He the priority of your life? If not, the consequences are great and permanent.

REFLECTION

How does this parable impact your heart? What emotions does it evoke?

When Jesus says, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead", how does his warning impact how you approach His Word?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is a difficult parable to work through as it gives a unique picture of what is yet to come. Throughout the Scriptures, there are many warnings about hell and the judgment that is to come. Jesus describes it many times as the place where there will be the weeping and gnashing of teeth. Here, Jesus describes the thoughts, emotions and words of somebody who is depicted in the torment of the bowels of hell. The possibility of the reality of existence where the condemned can look upon the children of God and vice versa also evokes strong emotional responses.

The Persistent Widow

Luke 18:1-8

Week of December 28

SYNOPSIS

A widow had been denied justice in a matter that needed judicial arbitration. When a judge came to town who neither feared God nor man, the widow went to plead her case. For some time, the judge refused to hear her case but finally he relented because her constant cries bothered him so that granting her justice became the better option.

CHARACTERS

Unjust Judge: The Contrast to the Lord

Persistent Widow: The Posture of God's People

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

Women in the first century were not allowed to be heard in the court. If there was an injustice, a woman would need to get her husband or son to represent her in the court. Here, the widow is without option as her husband has passed and no son is spoken of to represent her. Instead, she cries out from the back of the courthouse tent, yelling over the proceedings within. Her position gained her no position to be heard. Jesus challenged the convention that position determined the right to be heard. In His economy, the love of the judge was the precursor to being heard.

THE TRUTH

The parable of the persistent widow continues to reveal to us more about ultimate reality and who God is. This parable teaches the hearer how God views and relates to His children. The people of Israel were being oppressed by a religious rule that had created a chasm between God and His people. It was believed and reinforced that if you failed to uphold the Law in a single area, you were far from God and He would not hear your cries. This left the people hopeless and silent. If God was unwilling to hear your cries then what hope is there for anything better?

Jesus challenges this perspective of how God relates to His people by showing a clear contrast to the Lord in the person of the unjust judge. The judge believes that he is the highest authority (having no fear for God or man) and makes his ruling based on what he thinks is right or self-serving. He refuses to hear the widow's case, a clear violation of God's command to look after the widows and the orphans, and does not appoint someone to speak on her behalf in the court. He pretends as if she is not there until such time as her constant cries prevent him from fulfilling his duty and he fears that she will do something even more desperate to garner his attention.

Jesus then contrasts the actions of the unjust judge with that of the loving Lord. Will not God bring about justice to His chosen ones who cry out day and night? Will he keep putting them off? In these statements, Jesus first points His hearers to the true nature of the Lord who cares for and loves His children. He will give them justice and He will hear their cries. He also give a call to urgency to His hearers as He alludes to the desire of the Lord to put them off no longer. Not only has the Lord heard His people, but He is

responding quickly. Jesus closes by challenging His hearer to respond to the promise of God's justice. Will he find faith on earth? Will His hearers have ears to hear and eyes to see? Will they respond in trust, heed His words, and turn and repent?

REFLECTION

What does it feel like to cry out knowing that no one is listening? How does that shape your response?

Will he find faith on the earth? How does this question resonate in your life and relationship with God?

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Luke 18:9-14

Week of January 4

SYNOPSIS

Two men went to the temple to pray. The first was a Pharisee who prayed thanking God that he was not like other people - robbers, sinners or even like the tax collector. He touted that he fasted twice a week and paid his tithe religiously. The second was a tax collector who was unable to even look up to heaven as he prayed asking God to have mercy on him for he is a sinner. Jesus closes the parable stating that it is the tax collector and not the Pharisee who went home from the temple justified by God. "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

CHARACTERS

Pharisee: Religious Leaders and Those who Approach God as Already Worthy

Tax Collector: Those who Repent and Humbly Approach the Lord

CULTURAL CONVENTION CHALLENGED

The hierarchy within the culture of those who held position and status led them to justify themselves before the Lord. The religious, political and social elite saw themselves as exalted and in a place greater than their countrymen around them. While their status may have afforded them exaltation in this life, it is the humble who will be exalted in eternity.

THE TRUTH

The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is a beautiful encapsulation of the gospel of Christ. The Pharisee is focused on himself and what he believes is what is good and needed. He prays thanking the Lord for making him like those in society that he despised and those who were looked down upon. He believes that his status before the Lord is one of prominence because he is more worthy than the robbers, evildoers, adulterers and especially the tax collector that stood near him. His righteousness was based upon how much better or more righteous he perceived himself compared to others. This is no righteousness at all. Righteousness is of the Lord. He alone is righteous. So one can not gain righteousness in a comparison test with others. Just as it was with Abraham, righteousness is credited to us by the Lord (Genesis 15:6). Our faith in the Lord is the means of righteousness. The Pharisee further seeks to justify himself as he reminds the Lord of his actions done in accordance with the Law. He fast twice a week and was faithful to giving the tithe. Our acts are meaningless when they are done for personal gain and not out of worship and dependence upon the Lord. When our heart is not devoted to the Lord, our actions and deeds done in His name are as filthy rags, worthless and appalling (Isaiah 64:6). In contrast, the tax collector knows that he has no righteousness of his own. There is no reason for the Lord to look favorably upon him and yet he knows that the Lord is his only hope. He does not even see himself as worthy to gaze up in the direction of his prayers. Instead, he clutches his chest and cries out simply to the Lord for mercy for he

has wronged the Lord. The only justification that is available is the justification of the Lord. God, if you will be merciful, forgive this sinner. Your forgiveness would be more than enough. This is the gospel of Christ. Our merciful Heavenly Father has heard our prayers and He has brought forgiveness to those who seek it. He has sent Christ to justify those who call upon His name. Have you called upon His name? Have you been forgiven by the Lord?

REFLECTION

Are you justified by the grace of the Lord or are you clinging to your portfolio of good deeds and laundry list of people who you are not as sinful as?

What makes the prayer of the tax collector so powerful?
