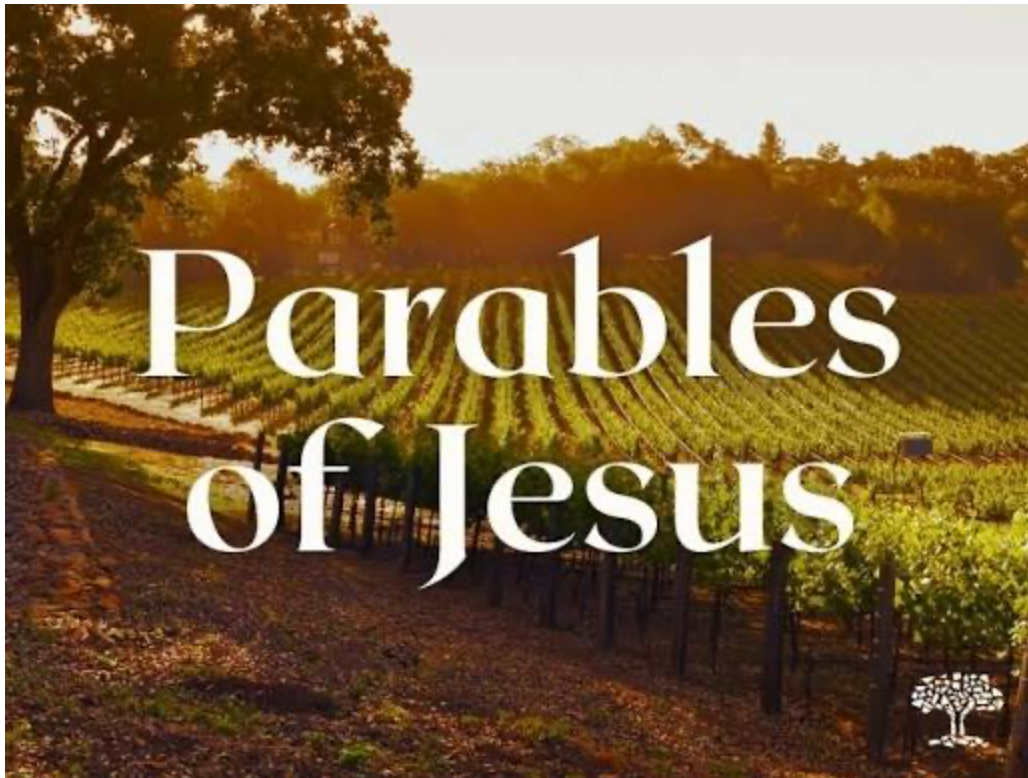




By Bill Cullen

July, 2026

Welcome to the Parable Study Series

Welcome to this seven-week journey through some of Jesus' most beloved and most challenging parables. Parables are more than stories — they are invitations. In them, Jesus reveals the heart of His Kingdom, exposes the truth about our own hearts, and draws us deeper into His grace.

Throughout this study, we will follow a simple but powerful rhythm called the CASE model — *Know, **C**onvict, **A**ssure, **S**tretch, **E**mpower, **A**pply*. This pattern mirrors the way God's Word has always worked: grounding us in truth, confronting our need, comforting us with grace, growing us in faith, equipping us by the Spirit, and sending us into daily life with purpose.

Each week we will slow down, listen carefully to Jesus, and let His Word do its work in us. Some sessions may challenge you. Others may comfort you. All of them will point you to Christ — the One who convicts us in love, assures us by His cross, stretches us toward maturity, empowers us by His Spirit, and works through us for the sake of others.

This study is meant to be both deeply personal and beautifully communal. You are encouraged to prepare during the week, participate honestly, pray boldly, and support one another. The Group Covenant at the back of this guide provides a simple framework for creating a safe, Christ-centered environment where Christ is the One who convicts us in love, assures us by His cross, stretches us toward maturity, empowers us by His Spirit, and works through us for the sake of others.

Whether you are new to Bible study or have walked with Jesus for many years, these seven weeks will invite you to see God's grace more clearly, trust His heart more deeply, and follow His Son more faithfully.

I'm grateful you're here.

Let's begin — and let Jesus make His CASE in us.

Serving In and through Christ and His love,

Bill Cullen

Parable Studies

For this seven-week Bible study series, I have selected seven of my favorite parables. In our study, we will use the CASE model to guide us through our reflection and discussion.

The CASE Model — A Participant's Guide

It is called the CASE model because at its heart, God makes His CASE to us — convicting, assuring, stretching, and empowering — while KNOW and APPLY serve as the bookends. Each session in this study follows the same rhythm. Once you learn the pattern, you will find that it mirrors the way God's Word has always worked — moving us from understanding to conviction, from grace to growth, and from empowerment to action.

Here is how each session flows:

K — KNOW

We begin by grounding ourselves in the text. *What does the passage actually say?* We look at context, key details, cultural background, and the story Jesus is telling. Before the Word can work on us, we need to understand it on its own terms.

C — CONVICT

The text holds up a mirror. Where does it challenge our assumptions, habits, or blind spots? Where does the Law do its work — exposing our need, our self-sufficiency, our distance from God's design? *Conviction is not condemnation*; it is the honest recognition that we need a Savior.

A — ASSURE

The Gospel speaks. Where does this passage anchor us in God's grace, Christ's finished work, and the Father's love? This is the heart of Christian theology, particularly Lutheran theology: **assurance rests not in our performance but in Christ's promise and grace**. Here we hear the good news that silences the accuser and sets the captive free.

S — STRETCH

Now the text invites growth. How does it push us beyond our comfort zone into deeper trust, bolder faith, or new understanding? Stretching is not about guilt — it is about possibility and opportunity. The God who assures us also calls us forward.

E — EMPOWER

The Holy Spirit equips. What resources — the Word, the Sacraments, the community of faith, the Comforter Himself — does Jesus provide to sustain us? We are never sent out empty-handed. Empowerment is God's provision for everything He asks.

A — APPLY

We move from the Biblical text into the world. What concrete, specific step will you take this week to live out what you have received? Application makes the study personal and practical — faith taking shape in daily life as Jesus, through His Spirit, is formed in us.

A Note on the Pattern: The CASE movement — **Convict** → **Assure** → **Stretch** → **Empower** — follows the ancient rhythm of **Law and Gospel**. The Law convicts us of our sin and need; the Gospel assures us of Christ's grace and mercy. From that assurance, we are stretched toward maturity and empowered for mission. **Know** and **Apply** bookends this movement, grounding each session in Scripture and sending participants into their daily lives. This is not a formula — it is the heartbeat of how God's Word has always worked.

For Personal Reflection and Discussion: The front half of each lesson includes commentary and discussion questions. However, after the closing prayer, there is a section entitled “*For Personal Reflection and Discussion*.” This section can be used in a couple of different ways: (1) It can be used for individual reflection on the lesson during the week, either (a) prior to the group meetings in preparation for the upcoming group meeting/discussion, or (b) it can be used for individual reflection during the week following the group meeting/discussion.

(2) A second option, the questions can be a replacement for the front half with the commentary. This option allows the discussion to be less prompted and guided by commentary and more by the individual thoughts of those in the group. Either way, the study guide uses the CASE model:

Know – Convict – Assure – Stretch – Empower – Apply

Note: The author’s preference would be for groups to choose “1 (a)” above. As the author, to encourage accountability, I would further suggest that following the opening prayer, the group leader begin each lesson by asking two questions: (1) “What did you learn from the preparatory readings during the week?” And (2) “How has your 'Apply' been going during the week?”

Group Covenant

At the back of this study guide is a “Group Covenant” that group members may choose to make with one another. This covenant is not being made with God with Divine consequences. It is a group covenant (agreement/pledge) between group members for a period of seven weeks. The intention of the covenant is to encourage members to support each other (both during group meetings and outside them) and to establish accountability to and for each other.

Sessions

1. Matthew 7:24-27 – The Wise and Foolish Builder.....Page 6
2. Matthew 20:1-16 – The Vineyard Workers.....Page 11
3. Matthew 25:31-46 – The Sheep and the Goats.....Page 16
4. Mark 4:2-20 – The Sower.....Page 21
5. Luke 10:25-27 – The Good Samaritan.....Page 26
6. Luke 15:1-7 – The Lost Sheep.....Page 31
7. Luke 15:11-32 – The Prodigal Son.....Page 36

The Nature and Purpose of Parables in the Bible

What Is a Parable

A parable (in Greek παραβολαῖς [parabolais](#)) literally is something “cast alongside” something else. Jesus’ parables were stories that were “cast alongside” a truth in order to illustrate that truth. His parables were teaching aids that taught by comparison. A common description of a parable is that it is “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.”

How Does a Parable Differ From an Allegory

The difference between a parable and an allegory is that a parable is brief and simple, designed to make one point, teach one lesson. The details of the story are meant to reinforce that one point, or they are an insignificant background. An allegory is more complex, where almost every character or event teaches a lesson of its own.

Why Did Jesus Teach In Parables

Jesus spoke in parables primarily to reveal the "mysteries of the kingdom of God" to sincere seekers while simultaneously concealing them from the spiritually hardened (Matthew 13:11-15). Generally, Jesus’ parables were meant to provoke thought and move His listeners to draw conclusions.

Jesus made sure His disciples understood the meaning of the parables: “When he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything” ([Mark 4:34b](#)).

What Are the Different Types of Parables

There is no single agreed-upon academic list of exact parable types; however, scholars, theologians, and educators often categorize biblical parables by their thematic or narrative purpose.

The four most common thematic and formal classifications include:

1. **Kingdom Parables:** Stories that reveal the nature, growth, and arrival of God's Kingdom.
 - *Examples:* [The Parable of the Sower](#), The Mustard Seed, and The Sheep and the Goats.
2. **Grace and Love Parables:** Parables that highlight God’s forgiveness, mercy, and radical love for the lost or marginalized.
 - *Examples:* The Vineyard Workers, The Lost Sheep, and The Prodigal Son.
3. **Wisdom and Duty Parables:** Stories designed to offer practical guidance on how to live, emphasizing preparation, stewardship, and loving one's neighbor.
 - *Examples:* The Wise and Foolish Builders, [The Parable of the Good Samaritan](#), and The Talents.
4. **Judgment and Warning Parables:** Narratives that carry a strict moral or eschatological warning against hypocrisy, greed, or the rejection of God.
 - *Examples:* The Rich Fool, The Wicked Vinedressers, and The Pharisee and the Publican.

THE SEVEN WEEKLY SESSIONS

WEEK 1 — THE WISE AND FOOLISH BUILDERS

Scripture: *Matthew 7:24–27 (cf. Luke 6:46–49)* **Theme:** *Build wisely on Jesus and His teaching. He alone is our sure and solid foundation.*

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, You are our Rock and our Redeemer. As we open Your Word, steady our hearts, sharpen our minds, and shape our lives. Build in us what only You can build. Amen.

K — KNOW — Setting the Scene

Jesus concludes His Sermon on the Mount with a vivid picture: two builders, two foundations, and one unavoidable storm. Both builders hear Jesus' words. Only one puts them into practice. The difference is not in the weather they face but in the foundation they choose.

This parable is the capstone to a sermon in which Jesus repeatedly contrasts His teaching with the "common wisdom" of the day. Six times, Jesus will say, "*You have heard it said... but I say to you.*" He is not offering advice; He is revealing the way of His Kingdom.

This parable is not merely about building wisely. It is Jesus' closing invitation to everyone who has heard the Sermon on the Mount. The question is no longer, "Did you hear Me?" but "Will you trust Me enough to build your life upon My words?"

1. Read the parable – Matthew 7:24-27. (Suggest the NIV)

Key Observations

- **Both houses look stable—until the storm comes.**
- **The storm is not the problem; the foundation is.**
- **Hearing Jesus is not the same as trusting and obeying Him.**

Additional Biblical Insight

2. Read the following passages. What breadth, depth, or balance do they add to Jesus' parable?
 - *1 Corinthians 1:18–25* — God's wisdom vs. the world's wisdom
 - *1 Corinthians 3:11* — Christ as the only true foundation
 - *Ephesians 2:20* — Christ the cornerstone
 - *1 Peter 2:6* — Trusting the chosen and precious stone
 - *James 1:22* — Hearing vs. doing the Word
3. Which of these passages most enriches your understanding of Jesus' parable? Why?

C — CONVICT

Jesus' story invites a searching question: **"Upon what am I building my life?"**

The Sermon on the Mount exposes the places where our foundations are shaky—where we admire Jesus’ words but resist living them.

4. Below are themes from the Sermon on the Mount. Check 1–3 areas where you sense the Spirit’s conviction:

- ☐ Mt. 5:1–12 — The Beatitudes: the attitudes of the Kingdom
- ☐ Mt. 5:13–16 — Being salt and light
- ☐ Mt. 5:17–20 — Spirit of the Law vs. letter of the Law
- ☐ Mt. 5:21–26 — Anger and reconciliation
- ☐ Mt. 5:27–30 — Lust and purity
- ☐ Mt. 5:33–37 — Truthfulness and integrity
- ☐ Mt. 5:38–42 — Letting go of retaliation
- ☐ Mt. 5:43–48 — Loving enemies
- ☐ Mt. 6:1–18 — Giving, praying, fasting without seeking attention
- ☐ Mt. 6:19–24 — Serving God rather than money
- ☐ Mt. 6:25–34 — Trusting God rather than anxiety
- ☐ Mt. 7:1–5 — Self-examination vs. judgment
- ☐ Mt. 7:12 — Treating others as you want to be treated
- ☐ Mt. 7:15–23 — Bearing good fruit

5. Where do you sense the Spirit saying, “This is an area where you are building on sand”?

A — ASSURE (Jesus FOR Us)

Conviction is not condemnation. It is the Spirit’s way of clearing space for grace.

In thinking about my sin, I realized “We need a Garbageman to help us get rid of the wreckage in our lives... Jesus takes out the garbage!” (Bill Cullen)

This is beautifully true. Jesus is both the One who removes the debris of our sin and the Master Carpenter who rebuilds what is broken.

6. Read the following verses aloud, one per person:

Romans 3:23 “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”

Romans 3:24 “and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

Romans 3:25 “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.”

2 Corinthians 5:21 “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

John 15:4 “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.”

John 15:5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

Philippians 1:6 “being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

7. Which of these verses most assures you that Christ is your foundation?

S — STRETCH

Grace does not leave us where it found us. Conviction is NOT condemnation. The Spirit who convicts, also assures us, then seeks to stretch us—inviting us into deeper trust and fuller obedience.

8. Return to the areas you checked earlier. Where is the Spirit nudging you toward growth?

- Share one area where you sense the Spirit stretching you. After each person shares, someone (perhaps the person on the left) prays briefly for them.

E — EMPOWER (Jesus IN Us)

Jesus never sends us out empty-handed. He indwells us by His Spirit, empowering us to do what He calls us to do.

9. Read *Philippians 2:12–13*. “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation [with great reverence,] ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. [author’s translation]

- Is there a particular Bible verse you find encouraging and empowering? If so, share.
- Consider memorizing Eph. 3:20 “[He] is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.”

10. God works **in** you so that you may work **out** what He is forming. Tools the Spirit commonly uses are

- | | | |
|------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| • Scripture | • Public worship | • Music |
| • Prayer | • Christian community | • Meditation |
| • The Sacraments | • Fasting | • Serving and witnessing |

- Which of these tools do you regularly use? Which one will you intentionally engage this week?

11. Consider memorizing *Ephesians 3:20*: “[He] is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.”

A — APPLY (Jesus THROUGH Us)

12. Return to the area where the Spirit is stretching you.

- **Identify two small, concrete steps you will take this week.**
 - What is the first step?
 - When will you take it?
 - Who can support or encourage you?
 - After completing a step, identify your next step.

Note: *Faith grows through small, Spirit-empowered acts of obedience.*

CLOSING PRAYER

Jesus, our Rock and Redeemer, thank You for taking our broken foundations and rebuilding us by Your grace. Strengthen us through Your Spirit to live what we have heard today. Make our lives steady, resilient, and rooted in You. Amen.

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

KNOW

1. What does a life built on sand look like?

2. What does a life built on Jesus look like?

3. What questions remain for you?

CONVICT

4. As you reread the Sermon on the Mount, where do you feel conviction?

5. Why is this area “foolish” when compared to Jesus’ wisdom?

6. What needs to change?

ASSURE

7. Which of the assurance passages (Romans 3, 2 Corinthians 5, John 15, Philippians 1) most comforts you? Why?

STRETCH

8. Where is God stretching you?

9. Why is this difficult?

10. What resistance are you offering?

11. What would help break down that resistance?

EMPOWER

12. Which spiritual tools will you use this week? How might they strengthen you?

APPLY

13. What is your first step?

14. What is your next step?

WEEK 2 — THE VINEYARD WORKERS

Scripture: *Matthew 20:1–16*

Theme: God’s justice is rooted in mercy and human need, not in merit or deserving.

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, You see us not through the lens of our merit but through the depth of our need. As we open Your Word, teach us Your justice, shape our hearts with Your mercy, and help us value others as You value us. Amen.

K — KNOW

Setting the Scene

Jesus tells this parable as He approaches Jerusalem, where He will give His life for the undeserving. The story centers on a vineyard owner who repeatedly goes out to hire workers throughout the day. At day’s end, he pays every worker the same full day’s wage — whether they worked twelve hours or one.

The shock of the parable is not the work performed but the wage given. Jesus confronts our instinct to measure worth by effort, achievement, or merit. Instead, He reveals a Kingdom where the Father gives according to need and mercy.

Key Observations

- The late-hired workers have the same basic needs — food, shelter, dignity — as those hired early.
- The vineyard owner’s justice is not merit-based but mercy-based.
- Mercy is the choice of the giver; the only thing the receiver brings is need.
- The early workers’ frustration exposes how deeply we equate fairness with deserving.

Discussion

1. What expectations did the workers have? How reasonable were those expectations?
2. How do their expectations mirror the way people think about fairness today?
3. Choose two words to describe each group:
 - **All-day workers:** Deserving, jealous, cheated, resentful
 - **One-hour workers:** Undeserving, blessed, grateful, relieved
 - **Vineyard owner:** Generous, merciful, just, surprising
4. What emotions might the late-hired workers feel as the day passes — shame, helplessness, fear, unworthiness?
 - What might they feel when they receive a full day’s wage?
5. What emotions might the early workers feel when they see the late-hired workers paid first?
 - What do they feel when they receive the same amount?

6. Discuss the owner's question:

“Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?”

- What does this reveal about God's sovereignty and generosity?
- From the owner's perspective, define **justice** and **mercy** in Kingdom terms.

Additional Biblical Insight

7. Read the following passages. What dimension do they add to Jesus' teaching?

- **Hosea 6:6** — God desires mercy, not sacrifice
- **Micah 6:8** — Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly
- **Luke 6:36** — Be merciful as your [Heavenly] Father is merciful
- **Ephesians 2:4** — God is rich in mercy
- **James 5:11** — The Lord is full of compassion and mercy
- Which passage most deepens your understanding of the parable? Why?

C — CONVICT

The vineyard owner sees people through the lens of their need, not their merit. Jesus calls us to do the same.

Yet we often evaluate people by what they contribute, how hard they work, or whether we believe they “deserve” kindness, patience, or help.

8. When are you tempted to judge people by merit rather than need?
9. Who is someone — a person or a type of person — you have quietly labeled as undeserving?
10. What attitudes or assumptions does the Spirit bring to light?

Conviction is not condemnation. It is the Spirit revealing where our hearts are misaligned with Jesus and is meant to turn us to Jesus for forgiveness, and to the Spirit for change.

A — ASSURE (Jesus FOR Us)

Note: God's justice does not ignore or overlook our sin, but His justice, through the lens of His love, sees both our sin and our desperate need. Jesus satisfied both God's justice and His love (Romans 3:24-25). Because of Christ's suffering and death, God, now, is able to respond not with condemnation but with mercy (Romans 8:1-4).

Leader: “We have all sinned. We are all undeserving (Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:10). Yet God does not treat us according to our merit. He looks at us through the lens of our need and, through His Son, pours out mercy.”

Side One: “All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature... Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved.” (*Ephesians 2:3-5*)

Side Two:

“But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” (*Titus 3:4–5*)

Side One: We are forgiven.

Side Two: We have been made new.

All Together: alleluia! ALLELUIA!! ALLELUIA!!! (each time repeating louder)

S — STRETCH

Grace not only comforts us — it reshapes us. The Spirit stretches us to see others as Jesus sees them.

11. Return to the person or group you identified earlier.

- Why do you tend to judge them as undeserving?
- What fears, assumptions, or wounds shape that judgment?
- What change of heart or mind is the Spirit inviting in you?
- What would it look like to view them through the lens of need rather than merit?

Stretching is not guilt-driven. It is the Spirit opening new possibilities for love.

E — EMPOWER (Jesus IN Us)

Paul writes: “In view of God’s mercy... be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (*Romans 12:1–2*)

Transformation is the Spirit’s work. He renews our minds by anchoring us in God’s mercies. As we remember how undeservedly we have been loved, the Spirit produces His fruit in us (*Galatians 5:22–23*).

12. As a group, name the mercies God has shown you — mercies you did not earn and could never repay.

- Which of these mercies do you value most right now?
- Which mercy could you extend to the person you identified earlier?

13. The Spirit equips us through:

Scripture	Worship	Music
Prayer	Christian community	Meditation
The Sacraments	Fasting	Serving and witnessing

- Which of these tools will you intentionally engage this week?

A — APPLY (Jesus THROUGH Us)

14. Return to the person or situation where the Spirit is stretching you.

- Identify **two concrete ways** you can extend mercy this week.
- Choose **one** to act on in the next few days.
 - What is your first step?
 - When will you take it?
 - Who can support or encourage you?

Faith grows through small, Spirit-empowered acts of mercy.

CLOSING PRAYER

Jesus, our Merciful Savior, thank You for meeting us in our need and pouring out grace we could never earn. As You have shown mercy to us, empower us to show mercy to others. Make us generous in spirit, humble in heart, and rich in compassion. Amen.

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

KNOW

1. What initial thoughts or emotions does this parable stir in you?

2. What questions does it raise in a culture that prizes achievement and reward?

3. Do you want God to relate to you based on your merit or your need? Why?

CONVICT

4. Where are you tempted to judge people by what they contribute rather than by their need?

5. Who have you quietly labeled as unworthy or undeserving?

6. What needs to change in your heart or perspective?

ASSURE

7. Read 1 John 1:8–2:2. How does this passage invite, assure, or comfort you?

STRETCH

8. Where is God stretching you in how you view and value others?

9. Why is it difficult to value someone who seems to have little to offer?

EMPOWER

10. How does God's love for you — even in your sin — empower you to love others (Romans 5:7–8)?

11. How does the Spirit's presence in you empower mercy (Galatians 5:22–23; Philippians 2:13)?

APPLY

12. Identify one tangible way you can value the person or group you identified earlier.

13. What is one concrete action you will take this week?

WEEK 3 — THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS

Scripture: Matthew 25:31–46

Theme: *"The King who identifies with the least among us calls His people to do the same — and equips us by His grace to live it."*

Sub-theme: *Sins of omission are as real as sins of commission — and Jesus' sacrifice is sufficient for both.*

OPENING PRAYER

King Jesus, Your kingdom is a kingdom of love, and Your glory is revealed in Your care for the least, the lost, and the overlooked. Give me Your eyes to see what You see, Your heart to feel what You feel, and Your hands and feet to do what You do. As You have cared for me in my neediness, move me to care for the needy people I encounter today. Amen.

K — KNOW

Setting the Scene

Jesus speaks this parable during Holy Week. On Palm Sunday, He is hailed as King by ordinary, working-class Jews (Matthew 21:4–9). By Friday, He is crucified—rejected by the religious elite yet publicly identified by Pilate as “King of the Jews” (John 19:19–22). After His resurrection and ascension, He will return “in His glory” (Matthew 25:31).

What follows in this parable is Jesus' own description of what His *glory* looks like. Unexpectedly, His glory is not displayed in raw power or dazzling spectacle. It is revealed in His sacrificial love—love for the least, the vulnerable, and the unnoticed (John 12:23–33; Philippians 2:5–11).

Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus repeatedly says that His greatest glory will be revealed in His cross. The world's definition of glory is power and status. Jesus redefines glory as self-giving love. The returning King is the same crucified King. This love defines His kingdom and shapes the lives of its citizens.

Reading the Parable – Matthew 25:31–46 (NIV recommended).

Key Observations & Guiding Questions

1. Jesus' Glory

- When you picture Jesus returning “in His glory,” what images come to mind?
- How do those images compare with the glory described in John 12:23–33 and Philippians 2:5–11?

2. The Givers and Receivers (vv. 35–36)

- How would you describe the people in need?
- How would you describe those who served them?
- What motivated the givers?
- What were they aware of—and unaware of?

3. Those Who Failed to Give (vv. 42–44)

- How would you describe those on the left?
- In what ways are they similar to those on the right?
- What were they unaware of?

4. The King's Concern (vv. 40, 45)

- With whom is the Son of Man concerned?
- What does this reveal about the nature of His kingdom?
- What does this mean for you—both in caring for others and in being cared for?

A Note on Interpretation

Some interpreters argue that “the least of these” refers specifically to Jesus’ disciples or Christian missionaries. Others understand it more broadly as the vulnerable in general. This study adopts the broader reading because:

- it aligns with the parable’s emphasis on need,
- it fits Jesus’ wider teaching on neighbor-love,
- and it reflects the character of the King who identifies Himself with the needy.

A Lutheran (including my own) Perspective

Jesus is not teaching that acts of mercy earn salvation. Rather, acts of mercy reveal the character of Christ who indwells those who already belong to His kingdom. To paraphrase Luther, “Faith alone saves, but saving faith is never alone”—it naturally bears fruit in love (Ephesians 2:8–10; James 2:14–17). The sheep are not surprised because they were not trying to earn God's favor; they were simply living the new life Christ had already given them.

Additional Biblical Insights

1. Read the following passages. What dimension do they add to Jesus’ teaching?
 - **John 13:34–35** — Love as Jesus has loved us
 - **Galatians 6:9–10** — Do good as opportunity arises
 - **Ephesians 4:32** — Kindness, compassion, forgiveness
 - **1 Thessalonians 4:9–10** — Love that keeps growing
 - **James 4:17** — Sins of omission
 - **1 John 4:7–8, 19–21** — Loving others reveals our knowledge of God
2. Which passage most deepens your understanding of the parable?

C — CONVICT

Jesus’ parable exposes not only what we *do* but what we *fail to do*.

3. Who are “the least” in your city or community?
4. Who are the people you see—or avoid—on a regular basis?
 - When have you been like the sheep?
 - When have you been like the goats?
 - Where do you have the opportunity to do good but fail to act?

Conviction is not condemnation. It is the Spirit revealing where our hearts are misaligned with Jesus so that we turn to Him for forgiveness and to the Spirit for change.

A — ASSURE (Jesus FOR Us)

5. John writes, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. – 1 John 1:9

Paul writes, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. – Romans 8:1

Paul further states, as new creations in Christ, we are now “ambassadors of Christ” and have been entrusted with the “ministry of reconciliation.” – 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

- Form a circle. The leader begins by turning to the person on their left and saying: **“I am a sinner, and I need forgiveness and help.”**
The person responds: **“God forgives you, and I forgive you. God is here to help you, and so am I.”** Continue around the circle until all have spoken and received assurance.
- **If the group is comfortable in doing so**, conclude with a group hug or brief individual embraces. This embodied assurance reinforces the truth: **Jesus’ sacrifice covers both what we have done and what we have left undone.**

S — STRETCH

6. Which of the following most limits your active care for others?

My biases	Limited time	Lack of support
Indifference	Being unaware	Peer pressure
Concern for myself	Lack of encouragement	Other: _____

7. What makes living like the sheep a challenge for you? What needs to change?

Stretching is not guilt-driven. It is the Spirit opening new possibilities for love.

E — EMPOWER (Jesus IN Us)

8. Reflect on and discuss these statements:

“Genuine caring rarely flows from a ‘You should....’ Genuine caring flows from being cared for—freeing us from self and making us available for others.” —Bill Cullen

“When I know my back is covered, I don’t have to worry, and I am free for others.”—Bill Cullen

- How does knowing God cares for you and that God has your back empower you to care for others?
9. Which of the following passages most empowers you to care for others? Why?
- Joshua 1:9** – God is with us wherever we go
Matthew 19:26 – With God, the impossible is no longer impossible
Mark 9:21 – Jesus “looked at him and loved him” (although the man was not ready to respond)
1 Corinthians 16:14 – Do everything in love is more than a phrase
2 Corinthians 10:3-5 – For us, everything is subject to Jesus and His love

God does not promise a problem-free life or material abundance. He promises a life of meaning, purpose, and freedom—freedom to love because we are loved.

A — APPLY (Jesus THROUGH Us)

10. Think of three “stretches” in caring for others:

- A small stretch — something you can do this week
- A medium stretch — something to pursue over the next three months
- A big stretch — something to grow toward over the next year

11. This week: Choose your *small stretch*. Make a plan. Do it.

This quarter: Set a goal for your medium stretch. Invite one or two friends to join you.

This year: Name your big stretch. Create a reminder so it stays before you.

Faith grows through small, Spirit-empowered acts of love.

CLOSING PRAYER

King Jesus, around us in our fallen world are hurting people, people in need of Your love. Sadly, these people, sometimes our next-door neighbor or even members of our families, go unseen and unheard. Help us to see them and to hear them. As we see and hear, open our hearts. Stir Your Spirit within us and move us to love them, even as You do, even as You have loved us. Amen.

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

KNOW

1. Describe what you perceive to be the heart, mind, and desire of the “Son of Man,” the king.

What do those on the right see? Of what are they aware? Why?

2. What don’t those on the left see? Of what are they unaware? Why?

3. Describe the nature of the Kingdom the “Son of Man,” the king, envisions?

CONVICT

4. When, where, and why are you like those on the right?

5. When, where, and why are you like those on the left?

6. What needs to change in your awareness, your heart, and/or your perspective?

ASSURE

7. Read Romans 8:1-4 and Titus 3:4-6. How do these two passages assure, or comfort you? Which speaks loudest to you? Why?

STRETCH

8. Pray! Who is God putting in your mind and laying on your heart to extend care?

9. How and why would/will this be a stretch for you?

EMPOWER

10. Which of the following passages do you find most empowering: Joshua 1:9; 2 Corinthians 3:4-6; Philippians 4:13; 2 Peter 1:3??

APPLY

11. Focus on the person God put in mind and on your heart during “Stretch.” Plan one thing you can do per week over the course of the next month to show genuine care for this person.

WEEK 4 — THE SOWER AND THE SOILS

Scripture: Mark 4:2–20

Theme: The Word is always good. The Sower is always generous. The condition of the heart determines the fruit.

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, thank You for sowing the seeds of Your living Word. Make the soil of my life fertile that I might be increasingly receptive to Your Word and the prodding of Your Spirit. Grow Your roots deep. Give me ears that truly hear and a heart and mind of discernment. Keep the garden of my life cultivated, weeded, fertilized, and well-watered as I abide in You and You abide in me. Amen.

K — KNOW

Setting the Scene

Jesus tells this parable early in His ministry as crowds gather to hear Him. He is attracting crowds, with people coming for varied reasons and with varying levels of commitment. The story reflects that variety. The story is simple: a farmer scatters seed on four types of soil. The seed is the same. The Sower is the same. The difference is the condition of the ground.

This is not a parable about agricultural technique. It is a parable about **the heart** — about how people receive (or resist) the Word of God. Jesus describes conditions of readiness. He is not describing conditions that cannot be changed, but rather conditions that need attention.

1. Read the parable.

- For many, this is a familiar parable, but upon this reading, what are your initial thoughts, feelings, and/or questions?

The Four Soils

- **The Path — The Hard Heart** — The ground is packed down. The seed cannot penetrate. The Word is heard but not received.
 - **The Rocky Soil — The Shallow Heart** — The seed sprouts quickly but has no depth. Joy appears at first, but with shallow roots, trouble or persecution causes the plant to wither.
 - **The Thorny Soil — The Distracted Heart** — The Word takes root, but competing loves choke it out: worry, wealth, busyness, and the desires of life.
 - **The Good Soil — The Receptive Heart** — The Word is heard, received, nourished, and protected as the heart is softened by the Spirit through the Gospel. It produces fruit — sometimes thirtyfold, sometimes sixty, sometimes a hundred.
2. Describe what it looks like when a person allows a specific area of their life to become like the path, rocky, or thorny soil."

Key Observations

- The seed is always good. – Ro. 1:16
- The Sower is always generous. – 1 Tim. 2:3-6
- The difference is the condition of the heart. – Ezek. 36:26-27
- It is my (Bill Cullen's) supposition that every Christian contains **all four soils** in different areas of life.

Additional Biblical Insight

3. Read the following passages. What dimension do they add?

- Colossians 2:6–7 — Rooted and built up in Christ
- Colossians 3:1–4 — Setting the mind on things above
- Hebrews 12:1–2 — Throwing off what entangles
- John 15:1–8 — Abiding in the Vine
- Luke 13:6–9 — Jesus’ patient cultivation
 - Which passage most enriches your understanding of the parable? Why?

C — CONVICT

4. Jesus’ parable invites honest self-reflection: **What kind of soil am I today?**

Every believer has areas that are hard, shallow, or crowded — and areas where the Spirit has made the heart good soil. (1 John 1:7-10)

Reflection

5. Which attributes of each soil do you recognize in yourself?
- **Path:** Where am I unreceptive or resistant to what God’s Word is telling me?
 - **Rocky:** Where do I respond quickly but lack depth or perseverance?
 - **Thorny:** Where do worries, wealth, or busyness sidetrack or choke spiritual growth?
 - **Good Soil:** Where is God producing fruit (Galatians 5:22-23)?

Remember: *Conviction is not condemnation.*

It is the Spirit revealing where Jesus wants to heal, deepen, and clear the heart.

A — ASSURE (Jesus FOR Us)

6. The Sower does not give up on the soil. He keeps sowing. He keeps cultivating. He keeps working.

- **Person #1** reads aloud, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” – Isaiah 1:18
 - The same person completes the sentence stem, “**This passage assures us....**”
 - The whole group responds in unison, “**Amen. Thanks be to God.**”
- **Person #2** reads aloud, “so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” – Isaiah 55:11
 - The same person completes the sentence stem, “**This passage assures us....**”
 - The whole group responds in unison, “**Amen. Thanks be to God.**”
- **Person #3** reads, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness. I will build you up again, and you will be rebuilt,”.... ‘For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’ – Jeremiah 31:3,34
 - The same person completes the sentence stem, “**This passage assures us....**”
 - The whole group responds in unison, “**Amen. Thanks be to God.**”
- **Person #4** reads, “For the wage of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” – Romans 6:23
 - The same person completes the sentence stem, “**This passage assures us....**”
 - The whole group responds in unison, “**Amen. Thanks be to God.**”

- **Person #5** reads, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” – Philippians 1:6
 - The same person completes the sentence stem, “**This passage assures us....**”
 - The whole group responds in unison, “**Amen. Thanks be to God.**”
- **Person #6** reads, “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” – John 15:3
 - The same person completes the sentence stem, “**This passage assures us....**”
 - The whole group responds in unison, “**Amen. Thanks be to God.**”
- **Person #7** reads, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” – Ro. 8:38-39
 - The same person completes the sentence stem, “**This passage assures us....**”
 - The whole group responds in unison, “**Amen. Thanks be to God.**”

*Jesus does not abandon hard, rocky, or thorny hearts.
He forgives, cleanses, and continues His work until fruit appears.*

S — STRETCH

Grace does not leave us unchanged. The Spirit stretches us toward deeper receptivity.

To paraphrase Martin Franzmann, a noted 20th-century Lutheran theologian and New Testament scholar, “The Gospel is radical for at least three reasons: (1) It recognizes our wretchedness and total depravity and still sacrifices for us. (2) It doesn’t ask us to meet it halfway, or a quarter of the way, or even one percent of the way. It does it all and meets us 100% of the way. And (3) Once it gets a hold of us, it doesn’t leave us the same but transforms us into better people.”

7. Return to the soil conditions you identified earlier. What change is the Spirit inviting?
- **Path:** What would it look like to soften this area through prayer, confession, or openness?
 - **Rocky:** What practices could deepen your roots — Scripture, community, worship?
 - **Thorny:** What distractions or competing loves need to be cleared or reduced?
 - **Good Soil:** Where is God inviting even greater fruitfulness?

Stretching is not guilt-driven. It is the Spirit opening new possibilities for growth.

E — EMPOWER (Jesus IN Us)

8. Jesus’ Spirit does not merely convict and stretch — He equips. – John 15:4-5

Tools the Spirit Uses

- | | | |
|------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| • Scripture | • Worship | • Fasting |
| • Prayer | • Christian community | • Music |
| • The Sacraments | • Silence and solitude | • Serving and witnessing |
- Which of these do you regularly use? Which one will you intentionally engage this week?

*God is not asking you to produce fruit on your own.
He is asking you to remain open, receptive, and available — and He will do the growing.*

Note: Christians, particularly Lutherans, emphasize Word and Sacrament as “means of grace.”

A — APPLY (Jesus THROUGH Us)

9. Choose **one soil condition** where the Spirit is stretching you. Identify **two small, concrete steps** you will take this week.

- **First step:**
- **When will you take it?**
- **Who will support or encourage you?**

10. After completing the first step, identify your next one.

Fruit grows through small, Spirit-empowered acts of obedience.

*Fruit is the tangible evidence of Jesus' work **for** us and **in** us as it is now expressed **through** us!*

– John 15:4-5

CLOSING PRAYER

Jesus, our generous Sower, thank You for Your persistent Word and patient cultivation. Soften what is hard, deepen what is shallow, clear what is crowded, and strengthen what is good. Make our lives fruitful for Your Kingdom. Amen.

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

KNOW

1. Some call this parable the “Parable of the Sower,” others call it the “Parable of the Soils.” Which do you like better? Why?

2. Describe each of the soils. To what might you liken each in today's world?

The Path _____

Rocky _____

Thorny _____

Good _____

CONVICT

3. How are you like each of the soils? Which one are you most like?

ASSURE

4. How do the two passages below assure or comfort you? Which speaks loudest to you? Why?

Isaiah 55:11

Romans 6:23

Philippians 1:6

Jeremiah 31:3,34

Romans 8:38-39

Hebrews 9:24-26

STRETCH

5. Most Christians will have aspects of each of the soils. If you were to change the aspects of your life that are path-like, rocky-like, or thorny-like, which would challenge you the most? ...the least?
-
6. How and why would/will this be a stretch for you?
-

EMPOWER

7. Which of the following passages do you find most empowering: 2 Corinthians 3:4-6; 2 Corinthians 12:8-10; Colossians 1:29; 2 Peter 1:3-4; 1 John 4:4?
-

APPLY

8. In #5, start with the smallest stretch. Make a plan to begin your stretch. Take your first step this
-

FYI - Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8 contain eight different parables known as “kingdom parables.” Matthew contains seven of the eight, Mark contains four of the eight (three of which are also in Matthew, and one of which is in Luke), and Luke contains three of the eight (two of which are found in Mark and one in Matthew, and one of which is found only in Mark). Of the eight, only the Parable of the Sower (also known as the Parable of the Soils) is found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels.

- Matthew, Mark, Luke – the Sower
- Mark – the Growing Seed
- Matthew and Luke – the Yeast (Luke 13)
- Matthew and Mark – the Mustard Seed (also Luke 13)
- Mark and Luke – the Lamp (also Matthew 5)
- Matthew only – the Tares and Wheat, the Hidden Treasure, the Pearl of Great Price, the Dragnet

Note – In Jesus parable of the Growing Seed, six verses later (Mark 4:26-29), the seed grows while the farmer sleeps. The power is in the seed (the Word of God), not in the farmer. When freed from restraints and constraints, the Word will accomplish its God-designed purpose. It is God who is at work. – See Philippians 1:6; Philippians 2:13

WEEK 5 — THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Scripture: Luke 10:25–37

Theme: Jesus is our Good Samaritan — and by His Spirit, He becomes a Good Samaritan *through* us.

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, You are the One who finds us wounded, lifts us up, and carries us with Your mercy. As we open Your Word, quiet our self-justifying hearts, deepen our trust in Your grace, and shape us into people who love as You have loved us. Amen.

K — KNOW

Setting the Scene

A legal expert approaches Jesus with a question that sounds sincere but carries an agenda:

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responds by asking him what the Law says. The expert answers correctly — love God fully and love your neighbor as yourself.

But then comes the real motive:

- “He wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”
- He wants boundaries. He wants clarity on who he *doesn’t* have to love.

Jesus answers with a story that removes boundaries entirely.

The Story’s Movement

- The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a seventeen-mile stretch known as “Thieves’ Highway. It went through a rocky wilderness, making travelers relatively easy prey.
- A man is beaten and left half-dead on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho — a notoriously dangerous stretch.
- A priest and a Levite see him but pass by. Their reasons may be complex — ritual purity, fear, busyness — but the result is the same: **they do not love.**
- A Samaritan — a cultural enemy — sees the man, is moved with compassion, and acts with costly mercy. This animosity dates back to the time of Rehoboam and Jeroboam, when the Northern Kingdom of Israel (later known as Samaria) seceded from the Southern Kingdom of Judah. It was intensified after the return of the Exiles from Babylonian captivity.
- Jesus ends with a question that flips the expert’s original one:
“Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The issue is not identifying who qualifies as a neighbor.

The issue is **becoming** one.

Key Observations

- The expert seeks limits; Jesus removes them.
- The priest and Levite represent religious correctness without compassion.
- The Samaritan embodies mercy that crosses boundaries.
- The Samaritan extends beyond the as he promises to cover all additional expenses.
- Jesus reframes neighbor-love from a category to a calling.
- The wounded man contributes nothing but his neediness.
- Before we imitate the Samaritan, we must recognize that **Jesus is the true Samaritan who rescues us first.**

C — CONVICT

Jesus' story exposes both what we do and what we avoid.

Reflection Questions

1. How Godly is religion (priest and Levite) without compassion (Samaritan)?
2. When have you been tempted to limit who counts as “neighbor”?
3. Who are the people you tend to overlook, avoid, or explain away?
4. Where do you see yourself in the priest or Levite — aware of need but choosing distance?
5. What fears, assumptions, or habits keep you from costly compassion?

Conviction is not condemnation.

***It is the Spirit revealing where our hearts are misaligned with Jesus,
prompting us to turn to Him for forgiveness and change.***

A — ASSURE (Jesus FOR Us)

“Jesus would have the expert in the Law (and He would have us) know the full demands of the Law in order that we might truly despair in ourselves and come to know and experience Him as our Good Samaritan.”

Before Jesus calls us to love like the Samaritan, He loves *us* as our Good Samaritan. His acts of selfless giving are demonstrated most powerfully on the cross (Romans 5:8).

“What Jesus commands of us, Jesus is FOR us and IN us, so that He might also be a Good Samaritan THROUGH us.”

Scripture Assurance

6. Arrange your group in a circle. Number off by two, one-two, one-two. #1s will read a verse, then #2s will read.

#1s: Romans 3:24-25 “[We] are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice.”

#2s: Romans 5:7-8 “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

#1s: Romans 6:23 “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

#2s: Romans 8:1-4 “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. ³ For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

#1s: Titus 3:4-6 “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.”

#2s: 1 John 1:8-9 “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

ALL: 1 John 2:2 “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” **Thanks be to God!**

- *Jesus does not simply command mercy — He gives mercy.*
- *He does not simply tell us to bind wounds — He binds ours.*
- *He does not simply say “Go and do likewise” — He goes with us.*

S — STRETCH

Grace reshapes us. The Spirit stretches us beyond comfort into Christlike compassion.

7. Who is one person or group God is inviting you to see differently?
8. What makes loving them difficult — fear, fatigue, bias, past hurt, inconvenience?
9. What resistance do you feel internally?
10. What would it look like to take one small step toward mercy this week?

Stretching is not guilt-driven. It is the Spirit opening new possibilities for love.

E — EMPOWER (Jesus IN Us)

“Genuine caring rarely flows from a ‘You should....’

Genuine caring flows from being cared for—freeing us from self and making us available for others.”
— *Bill Cullen*

11. Jesus’ new commandment (John 13:34) begins not with the command to love. It begins with Jesus loving us. The command is love, “AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.” Having Jesus and His love is what enables and empowers us to love as He loves. With Jesus, we have love to spare.

- Which of the verses below do you find most empowering at this time?

John 15:5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

Philippians 4:13 “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

Ephesians 3:20 “[He] is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.”

2 Peter 1:3 “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

1 John 4:4 “You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”

12. One at a time, pray for empowerment for each person in your group.

Suggest: Gather in a circle. Put the person being prayed for in the center of the circle. Everyone places one hand on the person to be prayed for. Everyone around the person will say a short prayer. Continue until everyone has been in the center of the circle. (If your group has more than six people, divide it into groups of three or four.)

A — APPLY (Jesus THROUGH Us)

13. Return to your “Stretch” person or group (#7).

- **A small stretch** — something you can do this week to be a Good Samaritan.
- **A medium stretch** — something you will do over the next three months.
- **A big stretch** — something to grow toward over time.

- Who can support or encourage you?

(You can always revise your plan from week to week, but have a plan and execute the plan.)

Faith grows through small, Spirit-empowered acts of mercy.

CLOSING PRAYER

Jesus, our Good Samaritan, thank You for finding us in our brokenness, lifting us by Your grace, and carrying us with Your love. As You care for us, empower us to care for others. Stretch our hearts, steady our steps, and make us people who embody Your mercy in the world. Amen.

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

KNOW

1. How did Jews and Samaritans typically regard and feel about each other?

2. Priests and Levites were well versed in the Torah and Mosaic Law. What should they know from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18?

3. What is the expert in the Law wanting to do when he asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?”

4. How does Jesus’ question “Who was a neighbor?” flip the responsibility from someone being my neighbor to my responsibility to act neighborly regardless of other concerns?

CONVICT

5. How selective are you regarding those you treat neighborly?

6. Toward whom (person or person type) do you tend now to regard as neighbor or treat neighborly?

ASSURE

7. Which two passages below assure or comfort you the most? Why?

Romans 3:24-25

Romans 8:1-4

1 John 1:8-9

Romans 5:7-8

Titus 3:4-5

1 John 2:1-2

STRETCH

8. What aspect of the Good Samaritan story stretches (challenges) you the most? Why?

9. For whom in your life would being a Good Samaritan be a stretch or a challenge?

EMPOWER

10. Which of the following passages do you find most empowering: Matthew 19:26, John 15:4-5, Philippians 4:13, Ephesians 3:20, 2 Peter 1:3-4, 1 John 4:4

APPLY

11. Return to your “Stretch” person or group (#9).

- **A small stretch** — something you can do this week to be a Good Samaritan.
- **A medium stretch** — something you will do over the next three months.
- **A big stretch** — something to grow toward over time.

- Who can support or encourage you?

(You can always revise your plan from week to week, but have a plan and execute the plan.)

WEEK 6 — THE LOST SHEEP

Scripture: Luke 15:1–7

Theme: Jesus seeks, finds, and rejoices over the lost — including us — and calls His people to participate in His seeking love.

Pre-session preparation: Before the session starts, prepare a wooden cross large enough that each group member can nail a paper list to it. Also, bring enough nails for everyone to have a nail and at least one hammer.

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, Good Shepherd, You know our wandering and You know our worth. As we open Your Word, let Your seeking love find us again. Restore our hearts, renew our joy, and teach us to value others as You value us. Amen.

K — KNOW

Setting the Scene

Luke 15 opens with a contrast:

- **Tax collectors and sinners** are drawing near to Jesus.
- **Pharisees and teachers of the law are grumbling, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”**

Jesus tells three parables in this chapter, revealing the heart of God toward the lost. The first parable sets the tone: a shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep to seek one that has wandered.

This is not a story about livestock management. It is a revelation of God’s character.

1. Read the Parable — Luke 15:1–7 (NIV recommended)

Key Observations

- The shepherd notices the one sheep missing.
 - The shepherd takes the initiative — the sheep does not find its own way home.
 - The shepherd keeps searching “until he finds it.”
 - The shepherd, rather than scolding the sheep, lovingly carries it home on his shoulders.
 - The shepherd rejoices — and invites others to rejoice with him.
 - Jesus identifies Himself with the shepherd’s joy: “There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents...”
2. All three parables in this chapter end with angels or people rejoicing. Why do you think Jesus emphasizes joy rather than merely recovery? (See also 1 John 1:1-4)

Additional Biblical Insight

3. Read the following passages. What dimension do they add to Jesus’ teaching?
- **Ezekiel 34:11–16** — God Himself seeks His scattered sheep.
 - **Isaiah 53:6** — “We all, like sheep, have gone astray...”
 - **John 10:11–15** — Jesus the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.
 - **Luke 19:10** — “The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”
4. Which passage most enriches your understanding of Jesus as the seeking Shepherd? Why?

C — CONVICT

Reader #1 – Isaiah 53:6 “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way;”

Reader # 2 – Romans 3:10-12,23 “There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹ there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. ¹² All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.”... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

(Provide each participant with a piece of paper, a writing utensil, and a nail)

5. On your sheet/slip of paper, jot down ways you have sinned this past week, both sins of commission and sins of omission. *As it applies, you might specifically think of times you have, like the Pharisees and teachers of the law, been critical and judgmental, or sins where you, like a lost sheep, have strayed in thought, word, or deed.* The more specific you are, the more powerful this activity will be for you. If it makes you more comfortable, you can simply put the first letter of the sin. **Nobody will see your list. It will be destroyed.** Your slip is strictly between you and God.

Again, Conviction is not condemnation.

This act is not about shame — it is about naming what Jesus has already carried.

A — ASSURE (Jesus FOR Us)

Leader: Fold your paper so that no one can see what you wrote, then nail your sin to the cross.

Reader #3 – Isaiah 53:4-5 “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Reader #4 – 1 John 2:2 “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

Reader #5 – 2 Corinthians 5:21 “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Take 60 Seconds of Silence

Personally and privately reflect upon the cross and the depth of God’s love for you

Leader’s Prayer

Jesus, Good Shepherd, thank You for seeking us, finding us, and carrying us home. Our wandering does not cancel Your love. Our sin does not outweigh Your grace. In You, we are found. Amen.

Leader: “Where are your sins?”

Group: “They have been nailed to the cross.”

Leader: “Where is your life?”

Group: “Hidden with Christ in God.”

All: Thanks be to God.

S — STRETCH

Grace does not leave us where it found us. The Spirit stretches us to see others as Jesus sees them.

Your Personal Stretch

6. Where is the Spirit nudging you toward growth? What, if anything, is hindering you?

- ...deeper trust?
- ...compassion for someone you have avoided?
- ...valuing the “one” Jesus values?
- ...noticing who is missing?
- ...patience with someone who wanders?

7. Share one way the Spirit is stretching or challenging you in one of the above areas?

- After each person shares, someone nearby prays briefly for them.

A Congregational Stretch

8. How well does our faith community reflect the Shepherd’s heart?

- Do we notice who is missing?
- Do we pursue gently and lovingly?
- Do we rejoice when someone returns?
- Do we value the “one” as Jesus does?
- What change of heart or practice might the Spirit be inviting?

E — EMPOWER (Jesus IN Us)

Jesus never sends us out empty-handed. The Shepherd seeking us also empowers us to seek others.

9. Read aloud **Philippians 2:13** “For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.”

10. Which of the following passages most empowers you to care for others? Why?

- **Joshua 1:9** — God is with us wherever we go.
- **Matthew 19:26** — With God, the impossible becomes possible.
- **Mark 10:21** — Jesus “looked at him and loved him.”
- **2 Corinthians 3:4–5** — We can be confident, not because of who we are, but because of who Christ is.
- **Ephesians 3:20** — Jesus indwells us to do more than we can imagine.
- **Colossians 1:29** — We labor with the strength Christ gives.

Tools the Spirit Uses

11. Which of these will you intentionally engage this week?

- | | | |
|-------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| • Scripture | • The Sacraments | • Fasting |
| • Prayer | • Christian community | • Meditation |
| • Worship | • Music | • Serving and witnessing |

12. How might these tools strengthen you to value and pursue the “one”?

A — APPLY (Jesus THROUGH Us)

13. Prayerfully identify three “stretches” in caring for others:

- **A small stretch — this week**
Do one simple act of noticing, reaching out, or encouraging.
- **A medium stretch — next three months**
Develop a relationship, habit, or rhythm that reflects the Shepherd’s heart.
- **A big stretch — long-term**
Develop a lifestyle that consistently reinforces the valuing of the “one.”

14. Your First Step

- What is one concrete action you will take this week?
- When will you take it?
- Who can support or encourage you?

CLOSING PRAYER

Jesus, Good Shepherd, thank You for seeking us, finding us, and rejoicing over us. Empower us by Your Spirit to notice the lost, value the overlooked, and love with Your love. Give us Your heart. Amen.

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

KNOW

1. Why does Jesus tell the parable?

2. What are three words you would use to describe:

The Pharisees

The Shepherd

The Lost Sheep

The 99

CONVICT

3. Where do you see yourself in this parable?

...like the **sheep**, wandering through distraction, fear, stubbornness, or self-reliance?

...like the **Pharisees**, struggling to value those who seem “too lost,” “too messy,” or “too different”?

...like the **ninety-nine**, comfortable and unaware of the one who is missing?

ASSURE

4. Which passage below do you find most powerful and assuring? Explain.

- **Isaiah 53:4-5** _____
- **1 John 2:2** _____
- **2 Corinthians 5:21** _____

STRETCH

5. Who is someone you tend to devalue, overlook, or avoid?

6. What hinders or holds you back from valuing the “one” as Jesus values?

EMPOWER

7. Which passage below do you find most empowering? Explain.

- **Joshua 1:9** _____

- **Matthew 19:26** _____
- **Mark 10:21** _____
- **2 Corinthians 3:4–5** _____
- **Ephesians 3:30.** _____
- **Colossians 1:29** _____

APPLY

8. Identify one person you have tended to devalue and/or ignore that you will intentionally reach out to at least once a week over the course of the next month. Find a friend who will hold you accountable. _____

WEEK 7 — THE PRODIGAL SON (or THE WAITING FATHER)

Scripture: Luke 15:11–32

Theme: God’s love and grace are unconditional. They need only to be received through faith.

OPENING PRAYER

Father of mercy, thank You for never giving up on Your children. As we open Your Word today, help us see ourselves honestly, receive Your grace freely, and rejoice in Your heart for sinners. Remove our pride, calm our fears, and remind us that in Christ we are welcomed home. Through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

K — KNOW

Setting the Scene

A Word of Caution: There is a difference between a parable and an allegory. A parable is meant to teach one moral or spiritual lesson. An allegory is more complex, where nearly every character or setting has a lesson of its own. People are often tempted to try to turn parables into allegories. Such endeavors lead to a misreading of the parable.

This parable reveals the Father’s heart toward the undeserving and exposes the danger of self-righteousness.

The central truth/lesson this parable is meant to teach is that grace originates in the giver and flows from the giver, and the giver’s essence or nature. It is not earned, deserved, or merited. It is freely, graciously, abundantly, and unconditionally given.

This parable, like the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin, is told in response to the Pharisees’ and the teachers of the Law’s disgust with Jesus’ eating with tax collectors and sinners (people they deemed undeserving of a Rabbi’s time, let alone friendship in table fellowship).

While this is not an allegory, Jesus clearly intends these characters to correspond to His audience. The father represents Jesus (and by extension God), the tax collectors and sinners whom the Pharisees and teachers of the Law view as “unworthy” of Jesus’ attention are represented by the younger son. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law who have strove to obey the “letter of Law” (although they have totally missed the Law’s spirit and intent—see Matthew 5:17-20; Matthew 23:2-12) are represented by the older son.

Key Observations

- The father allows his younger son to exercise his “free will,” but poor judgment in the exercising of that free will comes with some natural consequences.
- By asking for his inheritance before his father had died, the younger son dishonors and shames his father, basically suggesting that your only value for me is in your death.
- The pursuit of independence and happiness frequently leads to poor judgment.
- Hitting “rock bottom” need not be the end; it can lead to a new beginning.
- Repentance (a turning to or a returning to), in the parable, was motivated by self-interest.
- The younger son returns home, not expecting grace, but expecting mercy in his father’s sense of fairness (he expected his father to accept him back, but as a servant rather than a son).
- Grace is immediate and unconditional; the father was waiting for, longing for, looking expectantly for the opportunity to give it.
- The father’s grace first welcomes and then complete the transformation of the younger son.

- Resentment comes from the self-righteous, those viewing themselves as deserving.
 - The same grace extended to the younger son was available to the older son; in either case, earning or meriting was not the issue. The issue was who the father was (the father's nature) and the son's acknowledgment of that nature and readiness to receive it.
1. Pick one of the observations upon which to comment or raise a question.
 2. Helmut Thielicke (a Lutheran theologian, professor, and author—1908-1986), wrote a book entitled *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*. In this book, he renames “the Parable of the Prodigal Son” to “the Parable of the Waiting Father.” He argues that the book is really more about the Father than it is about either of the sons. He also defines prodigal as “reckless waste” and argues the real prodigal in the story is the father with his unconditional grace and forgiveness.
 - What are your thoughts regarding Thielicke's renaming of the parable? What do you like/dislike about it?
 3. What are three words you would use to describe the father? ...the younger son? ...the older son?
 - How are you like or unlike each of the characters? Which are you the most like? Explain.
 4. It is said that “Justice is getting what you deserve—punishment. Mercy is not getting what you deserve—not receiving punishment. Grace is getting what you don't deserve—blessings instead of punishment.” (Author unknown, popularized by Billy Graham)
 - Where/how do you see this quote in the parable? How does this describe/fit God? ...us?

C — CONVICT

5. Reflecting on this past week, recall a time or times you have been like the Pharisees, teachers of the Law, and older brother—viewing yourself as deserving and viewing others or another as undeserving.
 - Where have I resented God's generosity toward someone I struggle to love?
6. Reflecting on this past week, recall a time or times you have been like the younger son still in the far country, wasting and squandering God's blessings—His blessings of time, talents, treasures, and/or relationships.
 - Where/when have I lived as though God is not watching for me, not running toward me?
7. Which was easier for you, resembling the younger son or the older son? Explain.
 - The younger son's behavior has been described as “functional atheism.” Would you agree or disagree with this description? Explain.

(Participants may want to share/confess out loud about their sin; if they do, they should be given time to do so, but no one should feel that it is expected of them.)

8. **Pray aloud together: Psalm 51:10-12** “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”

A — ASSURE (Jesus FOR Us)

Note: *The father ran to his son before the son could finish his confession.*

As God seeks to assure us four verses/passage that are quite familiar to us by now are:

Romans 3:24-25 “[We] are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.”

1 Timothy 2:3-6 “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴ who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ.”

1 John 1:8-9 “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

1 John 2:2 “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

9. Which of the four passages above (*or of any of the “Assure” passages we have shared over the past seven weeks*) is most meaningful to you at this time?

10. What does it mean to you and/or for you that “Jesus is FOR you”?

S — STRETCH

11. Which is more of a stretch or more of a challenge for you:

- to become less like the older brother, critical, judgmental, jealous of another’s undeserved blessings?
 - What fear keeps you in older-brother mode?
- or to become less like the younger brother in the far country, squandering the blessings and grace of God shown to you?
 - What shame keeps you in younger-brother mode?
- Why do you think this is so challenging for you?
 - Why do you need to see and to value differently?

12. Where/how do you resist being embraced by the Father, accepting/receiving His love and forgiveness?

E — EMPOWER (Jesus IN Us)

Remembering: *Empowerment is not self-improvement; it is Spirit-improvement.*

13. Where and for what are you needing the Spirit’s empowerment at this time?

14. Privately read the passages below. After reading them, share with the group the one you find most empowering at this time.

- Once you have shared the passage (by its location), someone in the group should pray that passage for you, that God works its message in you. The rest of the group is praying silently.

Ezekiel 36:26 “I will give you a [new heart](#) and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

Romans 12:1-2 “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. ² Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

2 Corinthians 4:6 “For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

Philippians 1:6 “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.”

Colossians 3:1-3 “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Colossians 3:16 “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your [hearts](#) to God.”

1 Peter 5:7 “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

A — APPLY (Jesus THROUGH Us)

15. If your Stretch—#11 is to be less like the older brother, identify a person you have viewed as undeserving and make a conscious effort to celebrate and rejoice in his/her blessings—trying rejoicing both with the person and with others regarding the person. Pray for a genuine heart and mind.
16. If your Stretch—#11 is to be less like the younger brother, identify a blessing you have been given that you have tended to squander (time, talent, treasure, relationship), and come up with a plan on how you can intentionally use it to bring a smile to Jesus’ face, a way that reflects/expresses His love.
17. **2 Corinthians 5:17-20** – As God’s new creations in Christ, God has entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation, making us His ambassadors as though He Himself was/is acting through us.
 - Who is one person you can move toward this week with the Father’s posture of running, embracing, and restoring?

Parable Series Conclusion

18. Which parable/study was most meaningful for you? What do you most want to remember from or about it?

CLOSING PRAYER

For the closing prayer, gather in a circle. Encourage people to hold hands. Ask participants to reflect on their seven weeks together with one another and with God. Invite participants to offer a short prayer. Have the person to the leader's left begin. When the person is done, gently squeeze the hand of the person to the left to signal that they can begin. Proceed in the same manner until it gets back to the leader. The leader will conclude the prayer time. *If a person chooses not to pray out loud, when it is their turn, they should simply squeeze the hand of the person to their left.

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

KNOW

1. What surprises you most about the father's actions?

2. Which son receives the most attention in your thinking?

3. Believing the parable to be more about the Father and his unconditional love, Helmut Thielicke has renamed this parable "The Parable of the Waiting Father." What do you think?

CONVICT

4. Where/how do you resemble the younger son?

5. Where/how do you resemble the older son?

ASSURE

6. Regardless of which son you most identify, which Scripture assures you that God welcomes you home?

Romans 3:24-25 _____

1 Timothy 2:3-6 _____

1 John 1:8-9 _____

1 John 2:2 _____

STRETCH

7. Which attitude is God inviting you to surrender?

EMPOWER

8. Which promise of Scripture gives you confidence this week?

Ezekiel 36:26 _____

Romans 12:1-2 _____

2 Corinthians 4:6 _____

Philippians 1:6 _____

Colossians 3:1-3 _____

Colossians 3:16 _____

1 Peter 5:7 _____

APPLY

10. What relationship needs reconciliation?

11. What concrete step will you take this week?

Bible Study Group Covenant

A shared commitment for Christ-centered community

1. Our Purpose

We gather as a small group to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ — learning His Word, practicing His way of life, and encouraging one another to live as His people in the world.

2. Our Commitments to One Another

Presence

I will make participation in this group a priority.
If I must miss, I will communicate with the group leader.

Confidentiality

Personal stories shared in the group stay in the group.
Stories are ours to protect, not to repeat.

Scripture & Prayer

We will center our time on God's Word and prayer.
We will encourage one another to practice Scripture and prayer throughout the week.

Participation

I will contribute honestly and graciously.
I will listen well and avoid dominating our conversations.

Spiritual Growth

I will pursue growth in Christ through Scripture, prayer, and obedience.
I welcome gentle accountability and encouragement from the group.

Hospitality & Care

We will create a safe, welcoming environment for all.
We will support one another in times of need.

Mission

We will look for ways to bless our neighbors, serve our community, and live out the Gospel together.

3. Our Group Practices

Begin and end on time.
Share leadership responsibilities as gifts allow.
Communicate respectfully and promptly.
Resolve conflict biblically and directly (Matthew 18:15–20).

4. Our Covenant

By God's grace, we commit to these practices for the sake of Christ, His church, and His mission.

Signed:

Group Members: _____

Date: _____