

THE
PARABLES
of JESUS

GROUP LEADER'S GUIDE

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Published by Wesleyan Publishing House
Indianapolis, Indiana 46250

This guide is to be used in conjunction with *The Parables of Jesus* by Kenneth Schenck (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2013).

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The Parables of Jesus forms the basis of this six-week group study. You and your group will discover how Jesus' parables applied to people in his day and how he exposed the hypocrisy and lack of faith of Israel's religious leaders. But you will also discover how these parables apply to life today. As you depend on the Holy Spirit for illumination and ways to apply the truths Jesus taught in parables, you will grow in wisdom and holiness. Trust God to make you and your group members more effective in ministering to the needs your contemporaries. He will not disappoint you!



Week 1

SEEDS AND WEEDS

Matthew 13; Mark 4

We sow the seed, but God makes it grow.

TO THE FACILITATOR

Begin this session with a brief sharing time. Does anyone wish to tell about an unusual experience he or she had this past week? By encouraging members to relate a personal experience, you prepare the group for discussion.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Jesus illustrated the various ways people hear and respond to the good news about the kingdom of God (Mark 4:1–20). Some resemble seed on a path that birds eat. Those hearers ignore the Word. Seed on rocky ground represent shallow hearers who receive the Word enthusiastically but fall away when trials come. Seed among thorns represents hearers who fail to produce fruit because the cares of life distract them. But Jesus also spoke about seed on good soil. It grows into a productive crop, and therefore represents those who hear God's Word and respond appropriately to it.

In *The Parables of Jesus*, author Kenneth Schenck identifies the fruit produced by good hearers of the Word as “fruit that does no wrong to others . . . and helps those who are in need. . . . It is the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). When we yield this kind of fruit in our lives, others are drawn to Christ (Matt. 5:16)” (p. 14).

The parable of the weeds in Matthew 13:24–30 illustrates how believers and unbelievers coexist because the Devil has sown weeds among good seed. A farmer's servants reported that weeds had grown among good seed, and they offered to uproot the weeds. However, the farmer feared they might uproot the wheat with the weeds, so he instructed them to wait until harvest to separate the good from the bad. Jesus identified the good seed as believers and the weeds as unbelievers mixed in by the Devil. At the end of the age, the angels will separate believers from unbelievers and consign each group to a specific destiny: fiery destruction for the unbelievers, bliss for the believers.

Mark 4:26–29 presents the parable of the growing seed. Illustrating kingdom growth, the seed continues to grow in spite of the sower's attention. A second parable about the voluminous growth of a mustard seed (4:30–32) illustrates the enormous growth of God's kingdom. Although we ought to be faithful stewards of the gospel, God is the one who brings about growth (see 1 Cor. 3:7).

Matthew 13 also includes the parable of the net (13:47–50), the parable of the hidden treasure and the pearl (13:44–46). The parable of the net signifies how angels at the end of the age will sort the “fish.” The bad fish (unbelievers) will be cast into Gehenna. The parable of the hidden treasure and the pearl reveals how valuable God’s kingdom is in spite of its small size compared with the size of the evil world system, but God’s kingdom brings great joy to all who cherish it.

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that spiritual value has nothing to do with the size of a church?
2. Do you think every Christian has the opportunity to grow spiritually? Why or why not?
3. Do you think weak Bible teaching affects the growth of the “seed” sown? Why or why not?
4. What cares of this life do you think hinder Christian growth most severely? Why those cares?
5. Why do you agree or disagree that many Christians are more interested in numeric church growth than in spiritual growth? Defend your answer.
6. How can we sow the seed of the Word of God more effectively?

WRAP-UP

If possible, give each group member a small packet of seeds as a reminder that Christians ought to sow the seed of the Word.



Week 2

PRODIGALS AND THE LOST

Matthew 21; Luke 15

Seek and welcome the lost.

TO THE FACILITATOR

Acknowledge your group members' birthdays, anniversaries, awards, and graduations. A word of congratulations from you will strengthen the facilitator-group member relationship.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Jesus told the parable of the two sons to show the religious leaders their sin. Like the second son in the story, they rejected the call of John the Baptist to repent and serve God (Matt. 21:30, 32; see also 3:1–10). However, those whom the religious leaders despised—the tax collectors and prostitutes—resembled the first son in the story. When they heard John the Baptist's message, they believed. Therefore, they were entering the kingdom of God ahead of the religious leaders (21:28–29, 31–32). Schenck comments about the religious leaders' lack of faith: "All the law-keeping they had done did not matter when they rejected God's purpose and plan" (*Parables*, p. 28).

Tax collectors and "sinners" earnestly wanted to hear what Jesus had to say, but the religious leaders were angry that Jesus welcomed them (Luke 15:1–2). In this setting, Jesus told three parables, each of which reveals God's heart of love and mercy toward the lost of Israel, including the lost religious leader.

The first parable concerns a lost sheep (15:1–7). Although ninety-nine remained in the fold, the shepherd ventured into the open country in search of the stray sheep. When he found it, he carried it on his shoulders back to the fold, and then invited his neighbors to share his joy. Jesus said heaven rejoices when one recovered sinner.

The second parable relates how a woman lost one of ten coins, but diligently swept her whole house until she found it (15:8–10). When she found it, she called her neighbors to help her celebrate the recovery of the missing coin. Again, Jesus said heaven rejoices when a lost sinner repents.

The third parable is often called the parable of the prodigal son, but it certainly deserves to be called the parable of the forgiving father (15:11–32). The younger of two sons requested his share of his father's estate, and then journeyed to a distant country, where he partied until he ran out of money. When a famine struck, the destitute son got a job feeding pigs. He sank so low that he

longed for the pigs' food. That's when "he came to his senses" (15:17), and decided to return home, where even his father's servants fared well. He even rehearsed a repentant confession and a plea that he would make to his father. So he traveled home. He was still a long way off, when his compassionate father ran to him, threw his arms around the repentant son, and kissed him. Following this joyful reunion, the father ordered new clothes, a ring, and sandals for the restored son, and also ordered the servants to prepare a feast and a celebration. He explained that his dead, lost son was now alive and found. The celebration angered the older brother, because nothing like that had been done for him. He decried his younger brother's wayward, riotous living, but the father urged him to rejoice that his lost brother had been found.

Obviously this parable focuses on the heavenly Father's love for the lost and the religious leaders' jealousy and disdain for the lost that had been found.

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Do you see in these three parables the roles of the Son, Spirit, and Father in the recovery of the lost? If so, describe each role.
2. Why do you agree or disagree that some Christians may be slow to welcome the lost into the fold?
3. How well do you think Christians value lost souls? Defend your answer.
4. Why do you agree or disagree that a lifelong unrepentant churchgoer is as lost as an unrepentant person who has never attended church?
5. How might Christians be more effective in the work of rescuing the lost?
6. How might believers celebrate the mercy God has bestowed on them?

WRAP-UP

Lead the group in reading or singing "Amazing Grace." Ask a volunteer to close the session in prayer.



Week 3

GOD'S MERCY

Matthew 18:21–35; Luke 10, 18

God shows boundless mercy.

TO THE FACILITATOR

Start and end every session on time. Group members appreciate a routine they can count on.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

An expert in the law tested Jesus by asking how to inherit eternal life (Luke 10:25). When Jesus answered with the first and second greatest commandments, the lawyer asked, “Who is my neighbor?” (10:29). This question prompted Jesus to relate the parable of the good Samaritan about a traveler who was jumped on by robbers, beaten, and left for dead (Luke 10:25–37). A priest and a Levite saw the critically injured traveler, but they did not help him. However, a Samaritan came along, took pity on the victim, bandaged his wounds, put him on his own donkey, and took him to an inn. There, he paid the innkeeper to care for the victim until promised to reimburse additional expenses when he returned.

Jesus asked the lawyer to identify the person who acted as the victim’s neighbor. The lawyer must have choked on his words, because he and his fellow Jews despised Samaritans. Without saying the Samaritan, he simply admitted, “The one who had mercy on him” (10:37). Then, Jesus told the lawyer, “Go and do likewise.” The parable illustrates how God’s mercy extends even to those who the Jews despised.

How ready are we to forgive those who wrong us? Matthew 18:21–35 focuses on a servant who received total forgiveness from the king to whom he owed an enormous amount of money. However, the forgiven servant refused to forgive a debt owed to him by a fellow servant. When the king learned what had happened, he became so angry that he not only rebuked his servant but also threw him into prison, where he would stay until he had paid back all he owed. Jesus predicted dire consequences for those who insult God’s grace by refusing to forgive others.

Jesus also told about a widow who persistently requested of an indifferent judge that would grant her justice against her adversary (Luke 18:1–8). Although he didn’t care about the widow, the judge finally honored her request because of her persistence in asking. God is not like the indifferent judge, but he honors the persistent prayers of his people.

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14) shows how God resists self-righteous religion but shows mercy to the humble who admit they are unworthy sinners and ask for mercy. He rejected the pious, proud prayer of the Pharisee, but answered the prayer of the tax collector, whom the Pharisee maligned.

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. How might our church perform Good-Samaritan neighborliness in our community?
2. Schenck expresses concern that “Christians sometimes use the Scriptures to try to get around the most important things God calls us to do” (*Parables*, p. 45). Why do you agree or disagree with this comment?
3. How might being a Good Samaritan cost an individual Christian? How might being a Good Samaritan cost a church?
4. Schenck observes that Christians can harbor hatred for others, for example Catholics, homosexuals, Muslims (see “Explore,” p. 49). Do you agree or disagree? Why?
5. If an adult son or daughter withholds forgiveness from an abusive parent, will God withhold forgiveness from him or her? Defend your answer.
6. Why might a Christian stop praying?
7. How would you encourage a Christian who has been praying for many years for the salvation of a loved one?
8. How does spiritual pride sometimes manifest itself?
9. How have you or someone you know shown mercy to others?

WRAP-UP

Go around the group, reading a few verses each of the parable of the good Samaritan.



Week 4

MONEY AND THE KINGDOM

Luke 12, 16

God, not money, should control our lives.

TO THE FACILITATOR

Ask whether anyone has a prayer request and pray briefly. This act on your part shows you care about your group members.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

A rich farmer enjoyed a plentiful crop, so he decided to replace small barns with big ones (Luke 12:13–21). He figured the huge grain supply would allow him to take life easy. He would eat, drink, and be merry. He was a fool, because he didn't build riches toward God, nor did he recognize the fact that someone else would get his goods when he died—an event that would happen that night. Jesus warned about greed, and assured us that abundant possessions do not constitute a complete life.

Jesus further pointed out the folly of trying to build a life on money instead of on God (Luke 16:1–19, 31). The rich man lived extravagantly, but when he died he left all his riches behind and entered the torment of Hades (hell). In striking contrast to the rich man's lifestyle and destiny, a beggar led an impoverished, famished life, but when he died angels carried him to Abraham's side. Riches do not buy anyone a place in heaven, nor do they follow anyone there.

Jesus also related a story about a business manager who was about to lose his job (16:1–9). Wisely, the manager decided to gain friends by greatly reducing what they owed his master. His thinking was the newly formed friendships would gain a welcome for him into the friends' homes. Jesus used this story to teach us to share with others riches and possessions we do not need.

Jesus taught the importance of handling wealth honestly in a trustworthy manner (16:10–12). We must decide whether we will serve God or money. In *The Parables of Jesus*, Schenck challenges us to ask, "How angry are we when someone scratches our perfect cars or our stocks go down? Rather, we should think of all our possessions as God's, with us as mere stewards of them" (p. 75).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that it is wise to save for retirement?
2. Is it necessary to live meagerly to be a spiritual person?
3. How might a rich Christian serve God instead of money?
4. Why do you agree or disagree that giving a tithe to the Lord is always commendable?
5. Is it wrong for a believer to lead an extravagant lifestyle? Why or why not?
6. Have you known a materially rich Christian who you believe was even richer toward God? Without mentioning the person's name explain why you believe he or she was so rich toward God?
7. Do you agree or disagree that the Bible teaches capitalism?
8. Why do you think the rich man in Jesus' story ended up in hell, whereas the beggar ended up in heaven?

WRAP-UP

Challenge each person to invest at least twenty dollars this week in a way that honors God.



Week 5

ANSWERING GOD'S INVITATION

Matthew 20–22; Luke 14

God's call.

TO THE FACILITATOR

Take some time to ask volunteers how they invested their twenty dollars this past week in a way that honored God.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Matthew 20:1–16 relates Jesus' story about a vineyard owner who hired workers early in the morning for the customary day wage. About 9 a.m. he contracted with more workers to labor in the vineyard. He continued to hire additional workers at noon, 3 p.m. and near the end of the day at 5 p.m. At the end of the day, he paid all the workers the same amount. This seeming unfairness infuriated those who had labored from early morning to evening. However, the owner insisted he could dispense his money as he wished, and asked the disgruntled workers if they were envious of his generosity.

The point of the story is, God generously rewards even those who answer his call late to work for him. Schenck offers the prayer: "Jesus, may I not begrudge those who have suffered less for the kingdom than I have. May I rejoice with those who rejoice" (*Parables*, p. 80).

The parable of the rebellious tenants (Matt. 21:33–46) indicts Israel's leadership for maltreating God's messengers and for rejecting and killing his Son. Just as the owner of the vineyard would punish the wicked tenants, so God will punish Israel's wicked leaders.

The chief priests and Pharisees got the point: Jesus was talking about them. They would have arrested Jesus on the spot, but they feared the crowd that esteemed him as a prophet.

Jesus spoke of the blessedness of in the kingdom of God (Luke 14:15–24), but not every invitee to the feast will accept the invitation. Jesus compared God's invitation to a man's invitation to many to attend a banquet. However, the invited guests declined for a variety of weak excuses. The host then opened the banquet to those who might be considered outcasts.

The point is this: By rejecting Jesus, Israel's religious leaders had rejected God's invitation to feast at his table. In response, God invited whosoever will to come and dine.

Matthew 22:11–14 focuses on a man who showed up improperly dressed at a king's banquet. When the king confronted him, the man was speechless. The king ordered the attendants to tie him

up and throw him out into the darkness, “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (22:13).

God invites not only Jews, but also Gentiles—all kinds of people—to his banquet, but only those who are arrayed in robes of righteousness may feast with him.

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Do you think God will reward workers who enter his “field” late in life as generously as he rewards those who spend almost a lifetime serving him? Why or why not?
2. On what basis does God reward his workers? (See 2 Cor. 4:1–2.)
3. How open is God’s invitation to feast with him? Defend your answer.
4. What is required to be properly dressed for God’s banquet?
5. Why do you agree or disagree that it doesn’t matter how Christians dress for church?
6. Why do you agree or disagree that “we must make sure everyone hears the invitation. We must communicate and show God’s love to everyone whether they receive and respond to it or not” (*Parables*, p.89)?
7. What do you think is the best way to communicate and show God’s love?
8. How do you think God’s call usually reaches a lost person?

WRAP-UP

Challenge each group member to think of one person he or she will invite to the gospel feast this week and decide how to extend that invitation.



Week 6

PARABLES OF THE END

Matthew 25

Future judgment.

TO THE FACILITATOR

Thank the group for attending and participating in *The Parables of Jesus* studies. Express appreciation for their excellent responses to each session's discussion questions.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Jesus spoke about ten virgins with lamps. They went out to meet the bridegroom who was returning from his bride's home to his home for the wedding banquet (Matt. 25:1–13). Five of the virgins were wise. They carried oil for their lamps; the other five were foolish. They did not carry any oil. After a long wait, all ten virgins fell asleep, but they awoke when they heard the bridegroom was coming. The five wise virgins were able to accompany the bridegroom to the banquet, but by the time the foolish virgins obtained oil and arrived at the bridegroom's house, the banquet was already under way, and the door was shut. They were denied entrance.

Jesus counseled those who heard this parable to watch and be ready, because the time of the Bridegroom's return is unknown. In *The Parables of Jesus*, Schenck suggests several ways we can keep our lamps burning (see "Explore," p. 97).

The parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30) reminds us that God rewards those who work hard and wisely use the resources he gives. It also teaches he does not want us to be idle and lazy with the money he has entrusted to us. Schenck comments, "We increase the master's resources by doing good in the world, bringing fruits of righteousness" (*Parables*, p. 99).

Jesus continued the parable of the talents by telling what a third servant did. He had received one talent, but was afraid to use it. So he buried the talent for safekeeping. Enraged that the servant did not put the talent to good use, the master gave the foolish servant's talent to the servant that had ten talents. Subsequently, he consigned the lazy servant to outer darkness.

Matthew 25:31–46 focuses on the judgment of the nations at Jesus' return. He will separate the unrighteous from the righteous "as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (25:32). He will place the sheep, the righteous, on his right, and the goats, the unrighteous, on his left. The righteous had provided food, clothing, and shelter for Jesus' brethren, and therefore will enter his kingdom.

But Jesus will send the unrighteous into eternal fire, because they had turned his brethren away in their time of need.

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. How much credibility do you attach to those who set a date for Jesus' return?
2. How would you answer someone who tells you Jesus is coming back next Saturday?
3. Why do you agree or disagree that the oil in the parable of the ten virgins is a symbol for the Holy Spirit?
4. What do you think is an appropriate way to wait for our Bridegroom, Jesus?
5. How might a believer wisely invest his or her spiritual gifts?
6. How might a believer hide his or her spiritual gifts?
7. How might God's promise to bless those who bless Abraham but curse those who curse him relate to the story of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31–46?
8. In *The Parables of Jesus*, Schenck refers to the mission of the church and states, "To Jesus, helping those in need is every bit as much a part of the mission as leading others to repentance" (p. 109). Why do you agree or disagree with this statement?
9. Do you think churches generally are weaker in helping the needy or in evangelizing the lost? How might churches strengthen the weaker function?

WRAP-UP

Ask volunteers to tell how studying *The Parables of Jesus* has helped them. Dismiss the group with the prayer that the Holy Spirit will use the learning of the past six weeks for God's glory.

If your group benefited from studying *The Parables of Jesus* together, check out *The Passion of Jesus* and *Jesus—The Mission* by Kenneth Schenck, available now!