



grow. pray. study.

March 19, 2023, *The Parables of the Kingdom*

What's a "parable"?

**MONDAY 3.20.23 Mark 4:33-34, Matthew 13:34-35**

Jesus taught with many "parables" (Greek *parabolē*). That word (and its Hebrew equivalent *māšāl*) meant using stories as images to get hearers thinking. Scholar N. T. Wright said, "Parables... aren't simply nice, friendly illustrations to help people get their minds round deep abstract truth. The truth they speak of is... what God is doing personally, bodily, in Jesus and his work, and what God will do through his death and resurrection.... it doesn't look like what most people were expecting." \*

- Jesus didn't invent the use of parables. For example, when Israel's King David lost his moral compass (cf. [2 Samuel 11:1-25](#)), Nathan the prophet's parable deftly showed how the king had abused his power (cf. [2 Samuel 11:26-12:13](#)). Instead of a scolding, the parable helped David to see himself more clearly. When has a sermon illustration, a Bible or other story given you insight into yourself? How do stories sometimes reach your heart when a lecture won't get through?
- Experienced teachers know students can learn more from wrestling with a question or experiment than if the teacher just tells them the answer. When his disciples asked, "Why parables?" Jesus said, "those who have will receive more.... as for those who don't have, even the little they have will be taken away from them" (Matthew 13:12). That wasn't arbitrary. Use muscles and they grow; left idle, they wither. In what ways have you received "more" by building your spiritual "muscles"?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you brought light and life. Guide me as I keep learning how to live into the life you offer, to stretch myself and grow in the atmosphere of your grace. Amen.

\* N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1–15*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. 162-163.

## Don't overlook the "beggar" at your gate

### TUESDAY 3.21.23 Luke 16:14, 19-31

Like the good Samaritan parable (cf. [Luke 10:25-37](#)), this story aimed to significantly stretch the limits of people's definition of "neighbor." Jesus didn't tell the story to satisfy our curiosity about details of the afterlife, but to challenge a flawed view of our values in life. He built the story on folk ideas about the afterlife common in his day. The "place of the dead" was *hades* in Greek; the fire imagery came from *Gehenna*, Jerusalem's garbage dump where things were always burning.

- The story focused on an unnamed "rich man" and Lazarus, who had to beg. (It was no accident that the poor man, not the rich, got the dignity of a personal name.) The rich man feasted while totally ignoring Lazarus "at his gate." Jesus pictured the beggar with virtuous Abraham, while the rich man (within shouting distance) now begged him to warn his brothers to avoid his sad fate. How did the rich man completely miss the neighbor at his gate? How easy is it for you to do that?
- Jesus said no one can serve two masters—it is impossible to serve both God and wealth (verse 13). Which "master" has your deepest allegiance? In the story, Jesus had Abraham say "Moses and the prophets" could show the rich man's brothers (and those sneering, money-loving Pharisees—verse 14) the way to life. What helps you build your values and actions (financial, social, and spiritual) on the principles of Moses and the prophets—and Jesus?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, give me a heart receptive to the life-giving principles found in the Bible. Help me to always read its messages in the light of your loving, generous life, death and resurrection. Amen.

## The kingdom: a feast that is open to all who will come

### WEDNESDAY 3.22.23 Luke 14:15-24

The prophet Isaiah had pictured God's kingdom as a great feast, one anyone would surely be eager to take part in (cf. [Isaiah 25:6-9](#)). Yet Jesus' told a parable in which the guests gave flimsy, obviously evasive excuses for not attending. That didn't stop the feast. Shockingly, against all usual social protocol, the king threw open the doors and not just invited but "urged" even the town's street people to come in and enjoy the royal banquet. No snobbish, exclusive party for God!

- Pastor Bruce Larsen wrote, "I had a good excuse for not having a more regular quiet time... for Bible reading and prayer. I would pray, 'Lord, I'm so busy. Help me simplify my schedule so I can put You first.' One day He seemed to say, 'Larsen, you haven't missed a meal in years.'" \* In what areas are you giving God excuses? How will you lower your internal defenses so that you can be more honest with God and with yourself?
- Jesus knew many "religious" people didn't want to share God's kingdom feast with "sinners" (i.e., "not as good as me"). His story wasn't about "the awful people who aren't like us." We're all spiritually "poor, crippled, blind and lame," invited to God's "feast" by grace. Can you see that you are a ragamuffin \*\* who must trust God's grace and mercy? Are you open to inviting people of all kinds into God's kingdom, even if at first you might feel a bit uncomfortable in their company?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you loved ragamuffin me enough to die for me, enough to promise to be with me every day. Guide me in the process of laying aside the rags of my pride to serve you and others every day in love and gratitude. Amen.

\* Bruce Larsen, *The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 26: Luke*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc. 1983, p. 228-230.

\*\* See Brennan Manning's classic *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out*. 1990/2000/2005: The Crown Publishing Group.

## Guard yourself from greed

### THURSDAY 3.23.23 Luke 12:13-21

Like the parable of the sheep and the goats (cf. [Matthew 25:31-45](#)), this sad parable stressed a basic kingdom principle: “One’s life isn’t determined by one’s possessions” (verse 15). Both [Colossians 3:5](#) and [Ephesians 5:5](#) called greed a type of “idolatry,” of loving something more than God. Jesus’ story reminded us that this life, and any material assets we enjoy in it, will end. Then the only question is, “Who will get all the ‘stuff’ I’ve accumulated?” Only God can (and does) offer us eternity.

- The man in Jesus’ story never asked himself, “How much do I need? How much is enough?” As he pondered what to do about his overstuffed barns, he carefully avoided the idea that “Maybe I could give away some of this huge surplus I have.” How easy or hard is it for you to be generous with the money, time or “stuff” you have? What wishes or fears get in the way of living generously?
- How do you understand Jesus’ inspiring phrase about being “rich toward God”? Living generously should be part of our “Methodist DNA.” Methodism’s founder John Wesley spoke of “comprehensive charity” at the end of his sermon “The Reward of the Righteous” to a society that lived Jesus’ words: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto ME.” \* What kinds of choices can you make, in day-to-day life, to become “rich toward God”?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, whenever my life ends, I want to have stored my greatest treasure with you, not left it behind for an auctioneer to dispose of. Guide me into the kind of life that is rich toward you.

Amen.

\* [Click here](#) if you’d like to read the full text of Wesley’s heartfelt sermon.

## Joy over one found sheep or coin

### FRIDAY 3.24.23 Luke 15:1-10

The “Prodigal Son” story was the last of three stories Jesus told Pharisees and legal experts critical for his mixing with “tax collectors and sinners.” The first story (echoing [Ezekiel 34:1-16](#)) was about a shepherd who rescued one lost sheep. In the second story, a woman lost a real treasure. “The ten silver coins are most likely the woman’s *ketubah*, or dowry—the only money she brings into the marriage that is... hers even if the marriage is dissolved.” \* Each coin was likely worth a day’s wages.

- Pastor Bruce Larson wrote, “A shepherd once explained that sheep nibble their way into lostness. They move from one tuft of green grass to the next, sometimes right through a hole in the fence. When they’re done nibbling, they can’t find the hole and they’re lost. Some of us know what that is—to nibble ourselves bit by bit into the far country.” \*\* Have you ever been like the lost sheep, not sure how to get home? What “shepherd(s)” has God used to find you and guide you home?
- The woman painstakingly searched in a dimly lit peasant home (remember, no electricity) with a straw-covered floor until she found the coin. Jesus ended these parables by saying, “Joy breaks out in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life.” Who are your “coins,” people you value enough to go out of your way to reach out to? Is there someone—family, friend, co-worker—you particularly sense Jesus calling you to “seek and find”?

**Prayer:** Gracious God, you came in the person of Jesus to seek and save the lost. Come into my heart each day to guide me to the lives you are still seeking. Amen.

\* Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993, comment on Luke 15:8.

\*\* Bruce Larson, *The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 26: Luke*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc. 1983, p. 235.

## **Furious, or willing to join the celebration?**

### **SATURDAY 3.25.23 Luke 15:25-32**

It's tempting to think Jesus' story about the "prodigal son" (cf. [Luke 15:11-24](#)) ended once the younger son came home from his naïve, self-indulgent life, the father embraced him, and the party began. But Jesus had more to the story. He told it, remember, to people who grumbled about him mixing with "tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 15:2). So, he also told about the older brother, sure he was the "good" son and not pleased at all to see his brother back home. At the story's end, the father poignantly pleaded with the older brother to join the party: "We had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found" (verse 32). As he did in a few other parables (e.g. [Luke 13:6-9](#), [Matthew 21:33-40](#)), Jesus left this story "unfinished" for his hearers to think about. He didn't say what the older brother did.

- The servant in the story said, "Your brother has arrived." When the father came out, the older son disowned his brother, saying, "This son of yours returned." The father shifted the relationship back: "This brother of yours," he said. Use your imagination to argue the older brother's case: why did he find it wrong to welcome the younger one home? In what ways was the "good" brother's reaction, and his whole argument, out of harmony with the father's wishes? How did Jesus put the responsibility on the Pharisees to decide how they would respond as he left the parable "unfinished"? Being honest about whatever "older brother" tendencies you find in yourself, how will you finish Jesus' parable? Will you join the Father in celebrating all the missing children who come home?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I want to "enter in" to the joy of your kingdom and celebrate what you are doing in others' lives. Move me from a "tit for tat" existence to an exuberant, abundant life. Amen.

**Prayer Requests** – [cor.org/prayer](http://cor.org/prayer) *Prayers of peace and comfort for:*