

The background of the entire page is a soft, warm-toned image. On the left, there is a silhouette of a person, likely Jesus, with long hair and a robe, standing with arms outstretched. In the lower right background, there is a silhouette of a lamb. The overall color palette is warm, with shades of orange, yellow, and brown.

Stories Jesus Told:

Finding Yourself in the Parables.



fhlm.org

Faith, Hope and Love Ministries



Faith, Hope, and Love Ministries

About Us

At FHLM, we are dedicated to nurturing faith, fostering hope, and spreading love. We provide both spiritual and practical guidance to Christians, students, and Christian leaders. We are not a church, and we do not offer financial support.

We are a small ministry with a simple hope: to put warm, thoughtful, Bible-centred resources into the hands of anyone who wants to grow closer to Jesus — whether you are gathering a group around a kitchen table or sitting quietly with a cup of tea and an open Bible. Everything we make is offered freely, in the hope that it will be a blessing and passed on.

Core Values

Our mission is grounded in the values of unconditional love and unity. We prioritise inclusion and diversity over dogmatism and division, reaching out to people right where they are, and trying our best to follow the example of Jesus.

Contents

This guide is organised into three main sections:

- Leaders Guide
- Bible Study Notes
- Worksheet

Note

This guide is formatted for double-sided printing, to save paper and make for a nicer reading experience.

Stay in Touch

We would love to stay in touch. Take a look through our growing library of Bible study and reflection guides, and find out how you can be part of what we are doing.

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Leader's Guide

Stories Jesus Told: Finding Yourself in the Parables

Introduction for Leaders and Solo Readers

Dear Friends,

Welcome to “Stories Jesus Told: Finding Yourself in the Parables,” from all of us at Faith, Hope, and Love Ministries. Whether you have gathered a small group around your kitchen table, or you are working through this quietly on your own, we are glad you have opened it. Over the coming sessions we will sit at the feet of the greatest storyteller who ever lived, and let Him tell us, once again, what the kingdom of God is actually like.

Jesus rarely explained the kingdom with a definition. He told a story instead — about a farmer scattering seed, a woman losing a coin, a father running down a road, a stranger stopping to bandage a wound. Ordinary things, every one of them. And that was rather the point: He was showing His first hearers, and He is still showing us, that the kingdom of heaven is not somewhere far off and complicated, but close at hand, hidden in the middle of everyday life, waiting to be noticed. If this is your first real look at the Christian faith, you are in very good company here — nobody needs a theology degree to follow a story, only a willingness to sit down, listen, and ask the question every good story eventually asks of us: where am I in this one?

You should feel entirely free to make this guide your own. Skip a session that doesn’t fit your group this month, spend two weeks on one that does, follow a rabbit trail if the conversation runs there. The material is a companion for the journey, not a set of instructions to be followed to the letter. You will also find a suggested prayer at the start and close of every session — pray them as written, reword them in your own voice, or set them aside altogether and pray from the heart, whichever helps you begin and end well.

Each session is laid out to fit on a single, double-sided page — the story and its setting on one side, questions for discussion and quiet reflection on the other — so that it is easy to photocopy and pass around a table. You can find out more about us, or simply say hello, at <https://fhlm.org>, or on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn.

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A word on Scripture: the verses in this guide are taken from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), used with kind permission. Please do read alongside whichever translation you already love — we are not endorsing any single one. What matters far more than the translation is that you read attentively, and let the Storyteller speak. If your group is thinking about outreach, this study also pairs naturally with two of our others, “Reaching the Lost” and “Grace on the Frontlines” — though it stands perfectly well on its own.

Our prayer is that these old, familiar stories would surprise you all over again — that somewhere between the sower and the banquet table, you would recognise your own place in them, and find that the door has been standing open all along.

In the love of Christ,

Faith, Hope and Love Ministries

Session 1: Ears to Hear – The Sower

Opening Prayer:

“Lord, before You teach us anything else, teach us how to listen. Break up the hard ground in us, clear away the thorns, and make us good soil today. Amen.”

Key Scripture:

Mark 4:3–9 (BSB) “Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. And as he was sowing, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Some fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun rose, the seedlings were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the seedlings, and they yielded no crop. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it sprouted, grew up, and produced a crop—one bearing thirtyfold, another sixtyfold, and another a hundredfold.” Then Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Supplementary Scripture:

- Mark 4:14–17 (BSB) “The farmer sows the word. Some are like the seeds along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Some are like the seeds sown on rocky ground. They hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But they themselves have no root, and they remain for only a season. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.”
- Mark 4:18–20 (BSB) “Others are like the seeds sown among the thorns. They hear the word, but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. Still others are like the seeds sown on good soil. They hear the word, receive it, and produce a crop—thirtyfold, sixtyfold, or a hundredfold.”

Discussion Points:

1. Four Soils, One Farmer:

- Jesus’ farmer scatters seed on the path, the rocks and the thorns as freely as on good ground. What does that tell us about how generously God sows His word?
- Which of the four soils sounds most like your own heart at different seasons of life?

2. Becoming Good Soil:

- The good soil does nothing clever; it simply receives the seed and lets it grow. What might make you more receptive this week?
- Is there a ‘thorn’ — a worry, a distraction, an old grudge — that chokes things out before they can root?

Desired Outcomes:

We hope everyone leaves with a clearer, gentler picture of how God’s word takes root — not by force, but by patient sowing — and an honest sense of which soil describes them just now.

Closing Prayer:

“Father, thank You for scattering Your word so freely, even on ground like ours. Grow in us a harvest that lasts. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.”

Session 2: Small Beginnings, Surprising Growth – The Mustard Seed and the Yeast

Opening Prayer:

“God of small beginnings, You are never in a hurry, and You are never impressed by size the way we are. Teach us today to trust what You are quietly doing, even when it looks like almost nothing at all. Amen.”

Key Scripture:

Matthew 13:31–32 (BSB) “He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and planted in his field. Although it is the smallest of all seeds, yet it grows into the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”

Supplementary Scripture:

- Matthew 13:33 (BSB) “He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and mixed into three measures of flour, until all of it was leavened.”
- Ezekiel 17:23 (BSB) “I will plant it on the mountain heights of Israel so that it will bear branches; it will yield fruit and become a majestic cedar. Birds of every kind will nest under it, taking shelter in the shade of its branches.”

Discussion Points:

1. The Smallest Seed, the Largest Plant:

- Jesus picks the smallest seed a Galilean farmer would know and promises it becomes one of the largest garden plants. Why do you think He describes the kingdom’s beginnings this way rather than starting big?
- Where in your own life or church has something small — a kind word, a quiet decision, an ordinary Tuesday — turned out to matter far more than it looked like it would at the time?

2. Yeast Working in the Dark:

- Unlike the mustard seed, the yeast in the second parable can’t be seen at all once it’s mixed in — it just works, quietly, from the inside. What does that add to what the mustard seed already tells us about the kingdom?
- Is there a place in your own life where God seems to be working slowly and invisibly, and it’s hard to trust that anything is really happening?

Desired Outcomes:

We hope everyone comes away encouraged rather than impatient — trusting that God’s kingdom rarely announces itself with fanfare, and that the small, hidden, unglamorous things we do in faith are exactly the sort of seed He delights to grow into something far bigger than we can presently see.

Closing Prayer:

“Lord, forgive us when we despise small things. Help us to plant faithfully, trust patiently, and leave the growing to You, who has never once failed to bring a harvest in Your time. Amen.”

Session 3: The Shepherd Who Won't Stop Looking – The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

Opening Prayer:

"Good Shepherd, thank You for refusing to simply count Your losses and move on. Help us see ourselves, and everyone we know, the way You do: worth going after. Amen."

Key Scripture:

Luke 15:4-7 (BSB) "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the pasture and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders, comes home, and calls together his friends and neighbors to tell them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep!' I tell you that in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous ones who do not need to repent."

Supplementary Scripture:

- Luke 15:1-2 (BSB) "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around to listen to Jesus. So the Pharisees and scribes began to grumble: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."
- Luke 15:9-10 (BSB) "And when she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors to say, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of God's angels over one sinner who repents."

Discussion Points:

1. Leaving the Ninety-Nine:

- It sounds almost reckless: leaving ninety-nine sheep in open country to go chasing after one. What does this tell us about how God weighs the value of a single lost person?
- Have you ever felt like the one sheep — genuinely sought after, rather than simply tolerated or overlooked? What was that like?

2. A Woman, a Coin, and a Party:

- The woman lights a lamp and sweeps the whole house for a coin worth very little money but clearly a great deal to her. Why does Jesus tell almost the same story twice?
- Both stories end with a party. What does heaven's reaction to one recovered sinner tell us about how God feels when someone comes home?

Desired Outcomes:

We hope people leave with a settled sense that they are not one lost coin among many that God can't be bothered to count — and with fresh eyes for those around them who are still missing.

Closing Prayer:

"Father, thank You that You go looking. Thank You that heaven throws a party over one. Give us Your eyes for the lost, and Your joy when they are found. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

Session 4: Coming Home – The Prodigal Son

Opening Prayer:

"Father, some of us have wandered further than others, but all of us have wandered. As we sit with this story today, meet us on the road home, however far off we still are. Amen."

Key Scripture:

Luke 15:20-24 (BSB) "So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still in the distance, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. The son declared, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let us feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again! He was lost and is found!' So they began to celebrate."

Supplementary Scripture:

- Luke 15:17-19 (BSB) "Finally he came to his senses and said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have plenty of food, but here I am, starving to death! I will get up and go back to my father and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."'"
- Luke 15:31-32 (BSB) "'Son, you are always with me,' the father said, 'and all that is mine is yours. But it was fitting to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Discussion Points:

1. While He Was Still a Long Way Off:

- The father sees his son while he is still a long way off — so he must have been watching, and hoping. What does that tell you about how God waits for us?
- The son has a confession rehearsed, but the father interrupts it with celebration. What does that say about how grace works?

2. The Brother Who Stayed:

- The older brother has done everything right and still ends up outside, resentful rather than relieved. What does that reveal about obedience without love?
- The father pleads with him too, and we never learn whether he went in. Where do you find yourself today: on the road home, at the party, or still outside?

Desired Outcomes:

We hope this session leaves people with a fuller picture of the Father's heart — running, not waiting; celebrating, not merely tolerating — and the freedom to come home exactly as they are.

Closing Prayer:

"Father, thank You for running to meet us while we were still far off. Whether we are proud like the older brother or ashamed like the younger, draw us home to the same table. Amen."

Session 5: Who Is My Neighbour? – The Good Samaritan

Opening Prayer:

"Lord, You never asked us to love only those who are easy to love, or who would help us back. Open our eyes to the neighbour right in front of us. Amen."

Key Scripture:

Luke 10:30–35 (BSB) "Jesus took up this question and said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down the same road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So too, when a Levite came to that spot and saw him, he passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan on a journey came upon him, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Take care of him,' he said, 'and on my return I will repay you for any additional expense.'"

Supplementary Scripture:

- Luke 10:29 (BSB) "But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"
- Luke 10:36–37 (BSB) "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" "The one who showed him mercy," replied the expert in the law. Then Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Discussion Points:

1. The Question Behind the Question:

- The lawyer asks who his neighbour is hoping, Luke tells us, to justify himself – to find the edges of his obligation. Why does Jesus answer with a story rather than a list?
- The priest and the Levite had good religious reasons to keep walking. What excuses do we reach for when love would cost us something?

2. An Unlikely Neighbour:

- Jesus makes the hero a Samaritan – someone His audience had been taught to distrust. What does that tell us about where mercy is allowed to come from?
- Jesus turns the question around: not who qualifies as my neighbour, but who acted like one. How does that change the way you see people?

Desired Outcomes:

We hope everyone leaves with the question quietly turned around – not asking who deserves their love, but becoming the kind of person who stops, however inconvenient the person in the road turns out to be.

Closing Prayer:

"Lord, make us neighbours before we ask who qualifies. Give us eyes to see, and the courage to stop. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

Session 6: The Debt We Cannot Repay – The Unforgiving Servant

Opening Prayer:

"Merciful Father, You have forgiven us a debt we could never have repaid. Where we have been slow to forgive others, soften our hearts today, and remind us how much we've already been given. Amen."

Key Scripture:

Matthew 18:32-33 (BSB) "Then the master summoned him and said, 'You wicked servant! I forgave all your debt because you begged me. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had on you?'"

Supplementary Scripture:

- Matthew 18:21-22 (BSB) "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not just seven times, but seventy-seven times!'"
- Matthew 18:35 (BSB) "That is how My heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Discussion Points:

1. Two Very Different Debts:

- The first servant owes an amount he could never repay in a lifetime; the second owes him a few months' wages. Why do you think Jesus makes the contrast between the two debts so extreme?
- Peter asks if seven times is forgiving enough, and Jesus answers with a number that isn't really meant to be counted. What is Jesus actually teaching about the shape forgiveness is meant to take?

2. Forgiven People, Forgiving People:

- The forgiven servant's harshness toward his fellow servant seems almost unbelievable — until we recognise the same pattern in ourselves. Why is it so easy to receive mercy and then withhold it?
- Is there a debt someone owes you — an old hurt, a broken promise — that this story is putting its finger on? What would it look like to hand it over?

Desired Outcomes:

We hope people leave this session sobered but not crushed — freshly aware of the size of the debt God has already forgiven them, and a little more willing, by His grace rather than gritted teeth, to extend that same mercy to whoever owes them something far smaller.

Closing Prayer:

"Lord, You have forgiven us more than we can measure. Help us to forgive as freely as we've been forgiven, and to remember whose mercy got us here in the first place. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

Session 7: Rich Toward God – The Rich Fool

Opening Prayer:

"Generous Father, everything we have is a loan from Your hand, not a possession we can finally hold onto. Show us today what it means to be rich toward You. Amen."

Key Scripture:

Luke 12:16–21 (BSB) "Then He told them a parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced an abundance. So he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, since I have nowhere to store my crops?' Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and will build bigger ones, and there I will store up all my grain and my goods. Then I will say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take it easy. Eat, drink, and be merry!"' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be required of you. Then who will own what you have accumulated?' This is how it will be for anyone who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich toward God."

Supplementary Scripture:

- Luke 12:13–14 (BSB) "Someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." But Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed Me judge or executor between you?"
- Luke 12:15 (BSB) "And He said to them, "Watch out! Guard yourselves against every form of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Discussion Points:

1. Bigger Barns:

- The man in the story hasn't done anything crooked — he's simply had a good harvest and made a sensible plan. What makes his story a warning rather than good financial advice?
- Notice how many times he says 'I' and 'my' in his little speech to himself. What does that reveal about who he thinks his harvest ultimately belongs to?

2. Rich Toward God:

- Jesus doesn't condemn having possessions, but ends the story by contrasting storing up treasure for yourself with being 'rich toward God.' What do you think that second kind of richness actually looks like, in practice?
- If God asked for an account of your life tonight, the way He does in this story, what would you want to have been rich in?

Desired Outcomes:

We hope this session leaves everyone taking a longer, more honest look at what they're actually storing up — not from guilt, but from the simple, freeing reminder that we are stewards rather than owners, and that a life spent gathering wealth for God and for others outlasts any barn.

Closing Prayer:

"Lord, keep us from mistaking a full barn for a full life. Teach us to hold what we have loosely, and to invest instead in the things that outlast us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

Session 8: The Scandal of Grace – The Workers in the Vineyard

Opening Prayer:

“Generous Master, Your fairness looks nothing like ours, and that is very good news indeed. Help us today to celebrate Your generosity rather than resent it. Amen.”

Key Scripture:

Matthew 20:13–15 (BSB) “But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Did you not agree with me on one denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give this last man the same as I gave you. Do I not have the right to do as I please with what is mine? Or are you envious because I am generous?’”

Supplementary Scripture:

- Matthew 20:9–10 (BSB) “The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when the original workers came, they assumed they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarius.”
- Matthew 20:16 (BSB) “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Discussion Points:

1. The Same Wage for an Hour’s Work:

- Workers who laboured all day and workers hired at the very last hour all receive exactly the same pay. What is your gut reaction to that — and what do you think Jesus wants us to feel first, before we work out the theology?
- The landowner asks the grumbling workers, ‘are you envious because I am generous?’ What does that question expose about how easily we turn someone else’s grace into our own grievance?

2. The Last Being First:

- This parable is often told to people who wonder whether they’ve come to faith ‘too late,’ or served too little, to really belong. Who might need to hear this story today?
- How does it change the way you see other Christians — especially newer ones, or ones with very different stories from your own — to know God’s generosity toward them costs you nothing?

Desired Outcomes:

We hope everyone leaves this session with their sense of fairness gently unsettled in the best possible way — trading the grumbling of the early workers for the wonder that God’s grace was never a wage to be earned in the first place, and finding they can genuinely rejoice when it lands generously on somebody else.

Closing Prayer:

“Lord, Your generosity is scandalous by our standards, and we’re glad of it. Root out our envy, and teach us to celebrate grace wherever it falls. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.”

Session 9: Well Done, Good and Faithful Servant – The Talents

Opening Prayer:

“Master, You have entrusted each of us with more than we sometimes realise. Free us from fear, and give us the courage to put what You’ve given us to work. Amen.”

Key Scripture:

Matthew 25:20–21 (BSB) “The servant who had received the five talents came and presented five more. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.’ His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master!’”

Supplementary Scripture:

- Matthew 25:24–25 (BSB) “Finally, the servant who had received the one talent came and said, ‘Master, I knew that you are a hard man, reaping where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what belongs to you.’”
- Matthew 25:29 (BSB) “For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. But the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.”

Discussion Points:

1. Different Amounts, the Same Invitation:

- The servants are given different amounts — five talents, two, one — each ‘according to his ability.’ Why do you think the master doesn’t give everyone the same, and how does that change the way we compare ourselves to others?
- The first two servants both hear exactly the same words of praise, even though they gained different amounts. What does that tell you about what the master is actually rewarding?

2. The Fear That Buries a Gift:

- The third servant explains his caution by saying he was afraid, and had decided the master was a hard man. How does a wrong picture of God change the way we live?
- What is the ‘talent’ — a gift, an opportunity, a relationship, a resource — that you might be tempted to bury out of fear rather than risk putting to use?

Desired Outcomes:

We hope people leave this session freed from the fear that shrank the third servant’s world, and encouraged instead to take an honest inventory of whatever they’ve been entrusted with — however large or small it looks next to someone else’s — and to put it to work, trusting the character of the Master who gave it.

Closing Prayer:

“Lord, thank You for trusting us with what You’ve given. Take away our fear, and give us courage to use it well, so that one day we might hear You say, ‘well done.’ In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.”

Session 10: Come, for Everything Is Ready – The Great Banquet

Opening Prayer:

"Lord, You have set a table and thrown the doors wide open. Help us today to hear Your invitation freshly, and to help carry it to everyone still waiting outside. Amen."

Key Scripture:

Luke 14:21-23 (BSB) "The servant returned and reported all this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the city, and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' 'Sir,' the servant replied, 'what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' So the master told his servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.'"

Supplementary Scripture:

- Luke 14:16-18 (BSB) "But Jesus replied, "A certain man prepared a great banquet and invited many guests. When it was time for the banquet, he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' But one after another they all began to make excuses. The first one said, 'I have bought a field, and I need to go see it. Please excuse me.'"
- Luke 14:24 (BSB) "For I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will taste my banquet."

Discussion Points:

1. Excuses at the Door:

- The guests decline for perfectly reasonable reasons — a new field, new oxen, a new marriage. What respectable-sounding excuses quietly keep people, perhaps even us, from God's invitation?
- Have you ever caught yourself putting off something that mattered because something merely urgent got in the way first?

2. Streets, Alleys, and Highways:

- When the first guests decline, the host doesn't cancel — he sends his servant further out, and further still. What does the widening guest list tell us about the heart behind the invitation?
- Who do you know who hasn't yet heard, or hasn't yet believed, that they're genuinely invited — and what's one way you could help carry that invitation to them this week?

Desired Outcomes:

We hope this closing session sends everyone out with the banquet table firmly in view — grateful to have found a seat themselves, and eager to go looking for anyone still standing outside who hasn't yet heard that the door is open.

Closing Prayer:

"Lord, thank You for making room for us at Your table. Give us Your own heart for the ones still outside, and send us out gladly to say: come, for everything is now ready. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

Stories Jesus Told: Finding Yourself in the Parables

What if the story Jesus told about the sower, the shepherd, or the wasteful son was never really about them at all — but about you?

Bible Study Notes

Stories Jesus Told: Finding Yourself in the Parables

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Session 1 – Ears to Hear: The Sower

Jesus told this one beside a lake, with such a crowd pressing in that He ended up teaching from a boat while everyone else stood on the shore. It's worth picturing that scene for a moment — restless crowds, salt air, and Jesus reaching for the most ordinary illustration available to Him. "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed" (Mark 4:3), He begins, and every person listening would have pictured it instantly: the wide sweep of the arm, seed scattering in every direction, some of it landing exactly where the farmer intended and plenty of it not.

What follows is a story about four kinds of ground and one kind of seed. Seed on the hard-packed path never even gets the chance to sink in before the birds carry it off. Seed on the rocky ground springs up fast and dies faster, because it never puts down a root. Seed among the thorns grows for a while, tangled up with weeds, until it's finally choked out. And seed on good soil — well, that seed does exactly what seed is supposed to do: it "sprouted, grew up, and produced a crop — one bearing thirtyfold, another sixtyfold, and another a hundredfold" (Mark 4:8). Later, alone with His disciples, Jesus explains what He means: "The farmer sows the word" (Mark 4:14), and the four soils are four different ways a human heart can meet it.

None of the first three soils are villains exactly — they're just distracted, or shallow, or crowded. The seed along the path gets snatched before it can take hold. The seed on rocky ground receives the word, but has no root, so "when trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away" (Mark 4:17). The seed among thorns is choked by "the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desire for other things" (Mark 4:19) — which, if we're honest, sounds like a fairly accurate description of an ordinary week. Only the good soil simply receives what's given and lets it grow, producing a harvest so large it would have startled anyone hearing about it for the first time.

Here's the good news tucked inside a story that could otherwise sound discouraging: soil can change. A hard path can be broken up. Rocks can be cleared. Thorns can be pulled. None of us is stuck permanently being one kind of ground, and the farmer in this story is remarkably generous with His seed, scattering it as freely on the path as on the good earth, as though hoping every single patch of ground might yet surprise Him. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:9) isn't a threat. It's an invitation, offered as many times as it takes.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

Ears to Hear: The Sower

Here are some questions to guide your discussion and quiet reflection. There's no need to rush through them all — linger wherever God seems to be at work.

- 1.** What drew you to a study of the parables of Jesus, and what are you hoping to hear from Him in the weeks ahead?
- 2.** Read Mark 4:3–8 slowly. Which of the four soils sounds most like your heart right now — the path, the rocky ground, the thorns, or the good soil?
- 3.** What tends to snatch God's word away before it can take root in your life, the way the birds take the seed on the path?
- 4.** The rocky-ground hearer receives the word with joy but has no root. Have you ever seen enthusiasm for faith fade when things got hard? What might help roots grow deeper?
- 5.** Jesus names 'the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desire for other things' (Mark 4:19) as the thorns. Which of the three crowds your life the most just now?
- 6.** What would it look like, practically, for you to become 'good soil' this week?
- 7.** Why do you think Jesus explained this parable privately to His disciples rather than to the whole crowd?
- 8.** Sit with Mark 4:9. What might it mean for you personally to have 'ears to hear' right now?
- 9.** Is there a person in your life who could use some patient, hopeful sowing from you, even if you don't see fruit right away?
- 10.** Close by asking God to show you, honestly, what kind of soil you are today — and to begin turning over whatever needs turning.

Session 2 – Small Beginnings, Surprising Growth: The Mustard Seed and the Yeast

Jesus follows one farming story with two more, both very short, both about how easy it is to underestimate what God is doing. “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and planted in his field,” He says. “Although it is the smallest of all seeds, yet it grows into the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches” (Matthew 13:31-32). Anyone in the crowd who had ever grown a garden knew exactly what He meant — mustard seeds really were proverbially tiny, and mustard plants really did grow absurdly large for something that started that small.

There’s an old promise tucked behind this parable that Jesus’ listeners would likely have recognised. Centuries earlier, God had told His people, through the prophet Ezekiel, of a tree He would plant Himself: “I will plant it on the mountain heights of Israel so that it will bear branches; it will yield fruit and become a majestic cedar. Birds of every kind will nest under it, taking shelter in the shade of its branches” (Ezekiel 17:23). Jesus doesn’t mention Ezekiel by name, but the picture is unmistakably the same one, freshly told: God is still doing what He has always done, growing something enormous out of something that looked, at the start, like almost nothing at all.

The second parable moves indoors. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and mixed into three measures of flour, until all of it was leavened” (Matthew 13:33). Three measures of flour would have made an enormous batch of bread — enough to feed a small crowd — and yet a small handful of yeast, invisible once it’s kneaded in, is entirely sufficient to work its way through the whole thing. Unlike the mustard seed, which at least grows visibly above ground, the yeast simply disappears into the dough and gets on with its work in the dark, unseen and unhurried.

Put the two stories side by side and a single, patient message comes through: God’s kingdom rarely arrives with noise. It starts small — a seed, a pinch of yeast, a decision nobody else notices, a prayer prayed quietly on an ordinary evening — and it grows or spreads according to its own hidden logic, not ours. If something in your life or your church currently looks too small to matter, this might be exactly the moment to remember what mustard seeds and yeast are actually capable of.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

Small Beginnings, Surprising Growth: The Mustard Seed and the Yeast

Here are some questions to guide your discussion and quiet reflection. There's no need to rush through them all — linger wherever God seems to be at work.

- 1.** Read Matthew 13:31–32. Why do you think Jesus compares the kingdom to the smallest seed rather than the biggest one?
- 2.** Can you think of something small in your own life — a decision, a habit, a conversation — that grew into something far bigger than you expected?
- 3.** How does knowing the kingdom grows this way change the way you think about 'ordinary,' unremarkable days?
- 4.** Sit with Matthew 13:33. What do you make of the fact that yeast disappears once it's mixed in, and works completely unseen?
- 5.** Where might God be working quietly and invisibly in your life or church right now, even if you can't yet see the results?
- 6.** Read Ezekiel 17:23. How does this older promise about a tree God plants Himself help you understand what Jesus is doing in the mustard seed parable?
- 7.** Do you find it easy or hard to trust something you can't yet see growing? What helps you wait well?
- 8.** Is there a small act of faithfulness you've been tempted to dismiss as too small to matter? What might this parable say to that?
- 9.** How might this parable change the way you measure 'success' in your own walk with God, or in your church?
- 10.** What's one small seed — a prayer, a kindness, a conversation — you could plant this week and simply trust God with the growing?

Session 3 – The Shepherd Who Won’t Stop Looking: The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

Luke tells us exactly who Jesus was talking to when He told these two stories: “all the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around to listen to Jesus. So the Pharisees and scribes began to grumble: ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them’” (Luke 15:1-2). It’s worth sitting with that for a second, because it means these next stories weren’t abstract theology. They were Jesus’ answer to people complaining about exactly who He was spending His time with.

So He tells them about a shepherd with a hundred sheep who loses just one, and does something that would have struck His hearers as slightly reckless: he leaves the ninety-nine “in the pasture and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it” (Luke 15:4). When he does find it, there’s no scolding, no lecture about wandering off. He simply “joyfully puts it on his shoulders, comes home, and calls together his friends and neighbors” to celebrate (Luke 15:5-6). Jesus draws the obvious conclusion: “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous ones who do not need to repent” (Luke 15:7) — which is either wonderful news or a mild rebuke, depending entirely on which sheep you think you are.

Then, almost as though one story wasn’t enough to make the point, Jesus tells it again with different details: a woman loses one of ten silver coins, lights a lamp, sweeps the whole house, and searches carefully until she finds it. A single coin wasn’t a fortune, but it clearly mattered enough to her to justify turning the house upside down. And when she finds it, she throws exactly the same kind of party the shepherd did: “Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost coin” (Luke 15:9). Two stories, one shepherd and one housewife, one sheep and one coin — and the same joyful, slightly extravagant response to something small and lost being found again.

It would be easy to hear these stories and only think about other people — the ones we consider genuinely lost. But most of us know, if we’re honest, what it feels like to wander off from the flock or slip down behind the furniture ourselves. These parables were never really about God’s tolerance for sinners in general. They’re about His relentless, personal attention toward the one — and that one might, on any given day, be you.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

The Shepherd Who Won't Stop Looking: The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

Here are some questions to guide your discussion and quiet reflection. There's no need to rush through them all — linger wherever God seems to be at work.

- 1.** Luke tells us Jesus told this story to people grumbling about who He was eating with (Luke 15:1-2). Why do you think He answered their complaint with a story instead of an argument?
- 2.** Read Luke 15:4-6. What strikes you about a shepherd leaving ninety-nine sheep to go after just one?
- 3.** Have you ever felt genuinely, personally sought after by God? What was that like — or what would it mean to you if it happened?
- 4.** Why do you think Jesus tells almost the same story twice, once about a sheep and once about a coin?
- 5.** Both stories end with a celebration, calling friends and neighbours together. What does that tell you about how God feels when someone comes home?
- 6.** Sit with Luke 15:7. Does it surprise you that heaven celebrates one repentant sinner more than ninety-nine who don't need to repent? Why or why not?
- 7.** Who in your life might still be the 'one' that's missing — someone worth going after?
- 8.** What would it look like for you to join God in actively seeking someone who feels lost, rather than simply waiting for them to find their own way back?
- 9.** Is there a part of your own life or past that still feels 'lost' to you, even though God has already found it?
- 10.** Close by thanking God, specifically, for the time He came looking for you.

Session 4 – Coming Home: The Prodigal Son

This is the third story in a row Jesus tells about something lost — after the sheep and the coin comes the most famous parable of all, though it's really a story about two lost sons and one extravagant father. The younger one asks for his inheritance early, which was, in that culture, close to wishing his father dead, and takes himself off to a far country, where he spends the lot on a spectacularly good time. Then the money runs out, a famine arrives, and he ends up in a pigsty, hungry enough to envy the pigs their feed — about as far from home, and from dignity, as a Jewish son of that day could fall.

And then comes the hinge of the whole story: “Finally he came to his senses and said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have plenty of food, but here I am, starving to death! I will get up and go back to my father and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants”’” (Luke 15:17-19). He rehearses the confession, resolves to ask for nothing more than a hired hand’s place, and starts the long walk home, expecting — reasonably enough — some sort of reckoning. What he gets instead is this: “while he was still in the distance, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). The rehearsed speech barely gets out before the father is calling for the best robe, a ring, sandals, and the fattened calf: “For this son of mine was dead and is alive again! He was lost and is found!” (Luke 15:24).

But the story doesn’t end at the party — it ends outside it, with the older brother refusing to come in. He is furious, and his complaint is entirely reasonable on its own terms: years of faithful service, he protests, and not so much as a young goat to celebrate with his friends. He has done everything right, and it has apparently earned him nothing but resentment. The father goes out to him too, gently: “‘Son, you are always with me,’ the father said, ‘and all that is mine is yours’” (Luke 15:31) — but Luke leaves the ending open. We never find out whether the older brother goes in.

Two sons, two ways of being lost: one through open rebellion, the other through joyless obedience. And one father, running down the road for the first and pleading in the yard with the second, refusing to give up on either. The story leaves each of us standing somewhere in it — on the road home, at the feast, or still out in the yard — and it leaves the ending unfinished on purpose, because the next move is ours.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

Coming Home: The Prodigal Son

Here are some questions to guide your discussion and quiet reflection. There's no need to rush through them all — linger wherever God seems to be at work.

- 1.** Where do you find yourself most naturally in this story — the younger son, the older son, or the father?
- 2.** What does it cost the younger son to ask for his inheritance early? What is he really saying to his father by asking?
- 3.** Sit with Luke 15:17-19: "Finally he came to his senses." What does it take for any of us to reach that same moment of honesty?
- 4.** Read Luke 15:20 again. What does it tell you about the father that he sees his son 'while he was still in the distance'?
- 5.** The father interrupts his son's rehearsed confession with celebration. How does that challenge the way you imagine coming back to God after failure?
- 6.** Why do you think the older brother refuses to go in to the party? What is he really upset about?
- 7.** Read Luke 15:31-32. How does the father's response to the older son show the same patient love he showed the younger one?
- 8.** Have you ever related more to the 'obedient but joyless' older brother than to the wandering younger one? What does that feel like from the inside?
- 9.** The story ends without telling us whether the older brother ever goes in. What do you imagine happens next — and what would you want to say to him?
- 10.** Is there someone in your life still 'in the yard' that you could go out and plead with, the way the father did?

Session 5 – Who Is My Neighbour?: The Good Samaritan

The question that starts this parable sounds sincere enough, but Luke tells us the motive behind it. An expert in the law had stood up to test Jesus, and after Jesus turned the question of eternal life back on him — love God, and love your neighbour as yourself — the man, “wanting to justify himself,” asks, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). It’s a lawyer’s question, looking for the boundary of the requirement, the precise point where obligation stops.

Jesus answers with a story instead of a definition. “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead” (Luke 10:30). Then a priest comes along that same notoriously dangerous road, and “when he saw him, he passed by on the other side” (Luke 10:31); a Levite does exactly the same. Both men had respectable religious reasons available to them for keeping their distance — touching a possibly dead body would have made them ceremonially unclean — but the story doesn’t linger on their reasons. It simply lets their inaction speak for itself, twice.

Then comes the twist that would have landed hardest on Jesus’ original audience: the hero of the story is a Samaritan, someone Jewish listeners had been raised to view with suspicion, even contempt. He is the one who “had compassion,” who “bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine,” who carried the man to an inn and paid for his continued care out of his own pocket, promising the innkeeper, “on my return I will repay you for any additional expense” (Luke 10:33–35). It is precisely the person the lawyer would least have expected who ends up modelling what love of neighbour actually looks like.

So Jesus turns the original question completely around. Not ‘who counts as my neighbour, so I know where my duty ends,’ but “which of these three do you think was a neighbor” (Luke 10:36) — a question about who acted, not who qualified. The lawyer can’t quite bring himself to say ‘the Samaritan’ out loud, answering instead, “the one who showed him mercy” (Luke 10:37). And Jesus sends him off with four words that turn theology into a way of life: “Go and do likewise.”

Discussion and Reflection Questions

Who Is My Neighbour?: The Good Samaritan

Here are some questions to guide your discussion and quiet reflection. There's no need to rush through them all — linger wherever God seems to be at work.

- 1.** Read Luke 10:29. What do you make of the lawyer's motive for asking "who is my neighbor" — that he wanted to justify himself?
- 2.** Why do you think Jesus answers a definition question with a story instead?
- 3.** What respectable-sounding reasons do the priest and the Levite have for passing by? What are ours, today?
- 4.** Why do you think Jesus makes a Samaritan — someone His audience distrusted — the hero of the story?
- 5.** Sit with Luke 10:33–35. What details stand out to you about the way the Samaritan cares for the injured man?
- 6.** How does Jesus' closing question — 'which of these three do you think was a neighbor' — change the shape of the original question?
- 7.** Is there a group of people you find it easiest to walk past, whether physically or just in your attention? What might it look like to stop?
- 8.** Who has been a 'Samaritan' to you — someone unexpected who showed you real mercy?
- 9.** What does 'go and do likewise' (Luke 10:37) look like for you this week, in a specific, ordinary situation?
- 10.** Close by asking God to show you the neighbour right in front of you that you might otherwise walk past.

Session 6 – The Debt We Cannot Repay: The Unforgiving Servant

Peter opens this parable with a question that sounds almost generous by ordinary standards: “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21). Jewish teachers of the day often suggested three times was plenty, so Peter’s number probably felt like real spiritual stretch. Jesus’ answer resets the whole conversation: “not just seven times, but seventy-seven times!” (Matthew 18:22) — a number that isn’t meant to be counted at all, but to make counting itself beside the point.

Then He tells a story to show why. A king settles accounts with his servants, and one of them owes an amount so enormous that repayment was never realistically possible. When the servant begs for patience, the king does something far more generous than patience: he forgives the debt and releases him entirely. That servant walks out of the throne room debt-free, and almost immediately finds a fellow servant who owes him a comparatively tiny sum, seizes him by the throat, and has him thrown in prison until he can pay.

When the king hears about it, his response is blunt: “You wicked servant! I forgave all your debt because you begged me. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had on you?” (Matthew 18:32–33). The story ends with a warning that ought to make every one of us sit up a little: “That is how My heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart” (Matthew 18:35). Not because forgiveness earns us anything, but because a heart that has truly grasped how much it’s been forgiven finds it very hard to stay clenched around somebody else’s much smaller debt.

It’s worth being honest about how uncomfortable this story is meant to be. Most of us aren’t the villain in our own telling of it — we’re the wronged party, nursing a debt that feels entirely legitimate. But Jesus tells the story from the king’s vantage point, not ours, and from up there, every human debt looks roughly the same size next to the one we’ve already been forgiven. This week might be the week to hand one particular debt back to the King who’s already settled a far larger account on our behalf.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

The Debt We Cannot Repay: The Unforgiving Servant

Here are some questions to guide your discussion and quiet reflection. There's no need to rush through them all — linger wherever God seems to be at work.

- 1.** Read Matthew 18:21-22. Why do you think Peter's offer of 'seven times' felt generous to him, and why does Jesus go so much further?
- 2.** Sit with the size of the first servant's debt compared with the second servant's. Why do you think Jesus makes the contrast so extreme?
- 3.** How does it feel to imagine being forgiven a debt you could never possibly repay?
- 4.** Why do you think the forgiven servant turns around and treats his fellow servant so harshly? What does that reveal about how easily mercy received can be withheld?
- 5.** Read Matthew 18:32-33. What does the king's question expose about what forgiveness actually requires of us?
- 6.** Is there a debt someone owes you — an old hurt, a broken trust — that this story is putting its finger on?
- 7.** What's the difference between forgiving someone and pretending you were never hurt?
- 8.** Sit with Matthew 18:35. Why do you think Jesus ties our forgiveness of others so closely to how our Father treats us?
- 9.** What would it look like, practically, to begin releasing a debt you've been holding onto?
- 10.** Close by naming, silently or aloud, one thing you need to forgive — and asking God for the grace to do it 'from the heart.'

Session 7 – Rich Toward God: The Rich Fool

Someone in the crowd asks Jesus to settle an inheritance dispute, and Jesus refuses to take the bait, warning instead, “Watch out! Guard yourselves against every form of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). Then, to explain what He means, He tells a short, quiet story about a man whose land produces such a good crop that he doesn’t have enough room to store it — which sounds, on the face of it, like a genuinely good problem to have.

The man’s solution seems perfectly sensible: tear down the old barns, build bigger ones, and settle in for a comfortable retirement. “This is what I will do,” he tells himself, “I will tear down my barns and will build bigger ones... Then I will say to myself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take it easy. Eat, drink, and be merry!’” (Luke 12:18–19). Read it again and notice how many times he talks to himself, and how many times the words ‘I’ and ‘my’ turn up in just a couple of sentences. There isn’t another person, let alone God, anywhere in his plans.

That very night, the story takes a sudden, sobering turn: “God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be required of you. Then who will own what you have accumulated?’” (Luke 12:20). All that careful planning, and he never once asked the one question that actually mattered — not how much he had, but what it was for, and how long he’d have to enjoy it. Jesus draws the point together plainly: “This is how it will be for anyone who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:21).

This isn’t a story about the danger of having a good harvest, or even of having savings — Jesus never says the man’s crop was wrong to grow. It’s a story about a life quietly organised around the wrong centre, one barn at a time. Being ‘rich toward God’ is Jesus’ gentle alternative: a life spent gathering up things — generosity, faithfulness, love of neighbour — that a bigger barn could never hold in the first place.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

Rich Toward God: The Rich Fool

Here are some questions to guide your discussion and quiet reflection. There's no need to rush through them all — linger wherever God seems to be at work.

1. Read Luke 12:13-15. Why do you think Jesus refuses to settle the inheritance dispute, and warns about greed instead?
2. Sit with the rich fool's little speech to himself in Luke 12:17-19. How many times does he say 'I' or 'my'? What does that reveal?
3. Is there anything wrong with planning ahead or saving for the future? Where's the line between wisdom and the fool's mistake?
4. Read Luke 12:20. Why do you think God calls this man a 'fool,' when by every worldly measure he seems successful?
5. What does it mean, practically, to be 'rich toward God' rather than simply rich?
6. If your life were assessed tonight the way this man's was, what would you want to have been rich in?
7. What tends to crowd God out of your own planning for the future?
8. How does trusting God with your future change the way you hold onto what you currently have?
9. Is there something you're storing up — money, time, energy — that could be redirected toward something that outlasts a barn?
10. Close by asking God to show you one specific way to be rich toward Him this week.

Session 8 – The Scandal of Grace: The Workers in the Vineyard

This parable begins ordinarily enough: a landowner goes out at dawn to hire workers for his vineyard, agrees a fair wage of one denarius for the day, and sends them off to work. Then he goes back out again at nine, at noon, at three, and even at five in the afternoon – just one hour before the working day ends – each time finding more people standing idle and sending them into the vineyard too, this time simply promising to pay whatever is right.

When evening comes, the landowner pays the last workers first, and they receive a full day's wage for a single hour's labour. You can imagine what happens next: the workers who had toiled since dawn, watching this unfold, "assumed they would receive more" (Matthew 20:10) – and then discover they're paid exactly the same. Their complaint is entirely understandable in ordinary human terms: these men who were hired last worked only one hour, yet they've been made equal to those who bore the burden of the day and the scorching heat.

The landowner's answer is where the real teaching of the story lands. He hasn't cheated anyone – he paid precisely what he agreed with the early workers. "Friend, I am not being unfair to you... Do I not have the right to do as I please with what is mine? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:13-15). And there, in that one pointed question, is the whole scandal of grace laid bare: it was never a wage calculated by hours worked. It was a gift, freely given, and the only thing standing between the early workers and joy at someone else's good fortune was their own resentment.

Jesus closes with a line that turns every human ranking system upside down: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matthew 20:16). This story tends to comfort people who feel they've come to faith too late, served too little, or have too little to show for a life compared with someone else's – and it tends to unsettle people who've quietly started keeping score. Either way, it's an invitation to stop counting hours and start marvelling, the way heaven apparently does, at grace landing generously on somebody who didn't earn it. None of us did.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

The Scandal of Grace: The Workers in the Vineyard

Here are some questions to guide your discussion and quiet reflection. There's no need to rush through them all — linger wherever God seems to be at work.

- 1.** Read Matthew 20:9–10. What's your honest, gut reaction to workers who worked one hour getting paid the same as those who worked all day?
- 2.** Why do you think the landowner keeps going out all day to hire more workers, even at the eleventh hour?
- 3.** Sit with the grumbling of the early workers. What's legitimate about their complaint, and what's missing from it?
- 4.** Read Matthew 20:13–15. How does the landowner's question — 'are you envious because I am generous?' — land with you?
- 5.** Have you ever resented someone else receiving grace or a good thing you felt you'd worked harder for?
- 6.** Who might need to hear this parable today — someone who feels they've come to faith 'too late' or done 'too little'?
- 7.** How does it change the way you see other believers to know God's generosity toward them costs you nothing?
- 8.** Sit with Matthew 20:16. What does 'the last will be first' mean for how you measure your own standing before God?
- 9.** What would it look like for you to genuinely celebrate grace landing on someone you think doesn't deserve it?
- 10.** Close by thanking God specifically that His grace was never a wage you had to earn.

Session 9 – Well Done, Good and Faithful Servant: The Talents

A master preparing for a long journey entrusts his property to three servants, each according to his ability — five talents to one, two to another, and one to the third. A talent was a substantial sum, not a small tip, so even the smallest amount here represented real trust and real opportunity. The master then leaves, and the story becomes about what each servant does while he's away.

The first two servants get straight to work and double what they were given, five talents becoming ten, two becoming four. When the master returns and settles accounts, he says exactly the same words to both of them, regardless of how much they'd started with: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master!" (Matthew 25:21). Notice what he's praising — not the size of the return, but the faithfulness of the effort.

The third servant tells a very different story about himself, and about his master. "Master," he says, "I knew that you are a hard man, reaping where you have not sown... So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground" (Matthew 25:24-25). Fear, not laziness exactly, is what buried the gift — a wrong picture of the master's character led straight to a wasted opportunity. The master's response is severe, precisely because nothing at all was risked, nothing ventured, nothing grown: "for everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. But the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him" (Matthew 25:29).

It's tempting to read this story purely in terms of money, but the talents stand for anything entrusted to us — time, ability, relationships, opportunities to do good. The comparison the parable actually cares about isn't between the first servant and the second, since they receive identical praise despite different amounts; it's between fearful burial and faithful use. Whatever's been placed in your hands, however modest it looks next to somebody else's five talents, this story is an invitation to put it to work rather than dig a hole for it.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

Well Done, Good and Faithful Servant: The Talents

Here are some questions to guide your discussion and quiet reflection. There's no need to rush through them all — linger wherever God seems to be at work.

- 1.** The master entrusts a different amount to each servant, matched to what each one could carry. Why do you think he doesn't simply give all three the same?
- 2.** Sit with Matthew 25:20–21. What is the master actually praising in the first servant — the size of the return, or something else?
- 3.** Why do you think the first two servants receive exactly the same words of praise, despite starting with different amounts?
- 4.** Read Matthew 25:24–25. What picture of the master does the third servant have, and how does it shape his choice to bury the talent?
- 5.** Have you ever avoided using a gift or opportunity out of fear rather than laziness? What did that fear sound like?
- 6.** What 'talent' — a skill, a relationship, an opportunity, a resource — might you be tempted to bury rather than risk?
- 7.** How does a right picture of God's character change the way we're willing to take risks in faith?
- 8.** Sit with Matthew 25:29. Does this verse feel unfair to you, encouraging, or both? Why?
- 9.** What's one specific way you could put what you've been given to work this week, rather than keeping it safely buried?
- 10.** Close by asking God to grow your courage where fear has been holding you back.

Session 10 – Come, for Everything Is Ready: The Great Banquet

Jesus tells this story at a dinner party, after someone at the table remarks piously that whoever feasts in the kingdom of God will be blessed. His answer is a parable about a man who prepared a great banquet and invited many guests, sending his servant out when everything was finally ready to tell them, simply, “Come, for everything is now ready” (Luke 14:17).

What happens next is almost comic, if it weren’t so sad: “one after another they all began to make excuses” (Luke 14:18). One has just bought a field and needs to inspect it. Another has bought oxen and needs to try them out. A third has just married. None of these excuses are wicked — they’re the ordinary business of an ordinary life — but every single one of them is chosen over the invitation of a host who has already done all the preparing.

The host’s response isn’t to shrug and cancel the banquet. He gets angry, and then he gets creative: “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the city, and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame” (Luke 14:21). When there’s still room left even after that, he sends the servant out further still: “Go out to the highways and hedges and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full” (Luke 14:23). The guest list keeps widening, from the respectable first invitees, to the overlooked in the city, to total strangers along the open road — until the house is full of people who never expected to be there. Only one group misses out, and they are the ones who excused themselves: “For I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will taste my banquet” (Luke 14:24). It is a sobering line, and worth saying plainly: nobody is shut out of this banquet except by their own polite refusal.

This has been our closing story for good reason. Every parable in this study, in one way or another, has been an invitation — to be good soil, to trust small beginnings, to be found, to come home, to be a neighbour, to forgive as we’ve been forgiven, to be rich toward God, to celebrate grace, to use what we’ve been given. And here, at the end, is the invitation behind all the others, spoken as plainly as it can be spoken: the table is set, the door is open, and the last word belongs not to the ones who made their excuses, but to everyone still out on the highway who simply hasn’t heard yet that they’re wanted. Come, for everything is now ready.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

Come, for Everything Is Ready: The Great Banquet

Here are some questions to guide your discussion and quiet reflection. There's no need to rush through them all — linger wherever God seems to be at work.

- 1.** Read Luke 14:16–18. What are the respectable-sounding excuses the invited guests give for not coming?
- 2.** Have you ever put off something that truly mattered because something merely urgent got in the way first?
- 3.** Sit with Luke 14:21. Why do you think the host responds to rejection by widening the guest list rather than cancelling the banquet?
- 4.** Read Luke 14:23. What does 'compel them to come in' suggest about the urgency and warmth of the invitation?
- 5.** Who do you know who hasn't yet heard, or hasn't yet believed, that they're genuinely invited to God's table?
- 6.** This study pairs naturally with 'Reaching the Lost' and 'Grace on the Frontlines.' What's one practical way you could carry this invitation to someone this week?
- 7.** Looking back over the whole study, which parable has challenged you the most, and why?
- 8.** Which parable has comforted or freed you the most?
- 9.** If someone asked you what the kingdom of God is like, based on these ten stories, how would you answer in your own words?
- 10.** Close by praying for one specific person still 'on the highway,' asking God to help you help them find their seat at the table.

Worksheet for “Stories Jesus Told: Finding Yourself in the Parables”

For Group Leaders and Solo Readers

This worksheet is a supplementary resource for personal engagement with the study. Here’s how you might use it:

- **If you’re leading a group:** Hand out copies for people to take home. Explain that it’s meant for personal reflection and for putting the study into practice, and that finishing it is a blessing but never a requirement. When you gather, invite people to share whatever they’re comfortable sharing — what they’re learning, where a story has caught them off guard, what God has been doing.
- **If you’re studying on your own:** Use it as a companion to help the stories sink in and take root. It’s designed to help you sit with each parable a little longer and carry it into ordinary life.

A word for everyone: this worksheet is a practical tool to help you carry these old, familiar stories off the page and into your everyday life. It offers ten simple steps for growth — not a test to pass, but a gentle path to walk. Take them at your own pace, and be kind to yourself as you go.

Ten Steps to Live the Stories Jesus Told

None of these steps is complicated, and you certainly don't have to do them all at once. Take them one at a time, lean on God's grace, and let them help you become someone who doesn't just enjoy a good story, but actually steps inside it and lives it out.

1. Ask which soil you are (Mark 4:3-8)

Before each new week, take a quiet moment to ask God honestly what kind of ground your heart is right now — and what might need clearing.

2. Trust the small and the slow (Matthew 13:31-33)

Notice one small, unglamorous act of faithfulness this week, and resist the urge to measure it against something bigger.

3. Go looking for someone (Luke 15:4-7)

Think of one person who feels distant from God or from your church family, and reach out to them this week, however small the gesture.

4. Come home, or go out to the yard (Luke 15:20, 31-32)

If you're carrying shame, receive God's welcome without rehearsing your excuses. If you're carrying resentment, let the Father plead with you too.

5. Stop for the neighbour in front of you (Luke 10:33-37)

Choose one person this week — however inconvenient the timing — and simply stop, the way the Samaritan did.

6. Release one debt (Matthew 18:32-33)

Name someone you've been holding a grudge against, and take one concrete step toward forgiving them from the heart.

7. Hold your barns loosely (Luke 12:18-21)

Choose one thing you've been storing up, and give some of it away — generously, and without announcing it.

8. Celebrate someone else's grace (Matthew 20:13-15)

Notice when you feel envious of someone else's blessing this week, and consciously choose to rejoice with them instead.

9. Put your talent to work (Matthew 25:20-21)

Take one gift or opportunity you've been sitting on out of fear, and use it — even in a small way — before the week is out.

10. Carry the invitation further (Luke 14:21-23)

Think of one person still outside the banquet, and take one practical step towards inviting them in.

May these ten stories, and these ten small steps, help you find yourself in them all over again — sown in good soil, sought after, welcomed home, and sent out to carry the invitation to everyone still waiting outside the door.

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