

Parables in Matthew



Small Group Resource
Sept / Oct 2026

Parables in General



BIG Idea!

Stories for a reason

Parables are one of the tools Jesus used to explain the Kingdom of God. They are not always straight forward. Jesus used parables for a particular purpose to a particular audience in a particular context. He would often use a parable to get a response from his hearers, knowing that they would have “got” the imagery he was using.

Some have suggested that Jesus was trying to be subversive and clever to hide the true meaning of the stories to make people hunt out the real meaning. Augustine suggested that the parables only had an allegorical meaning. Eg) if we looked at the good samaritan story he suggested that the; The man beaten up was referring to the fact that Adam was fallen from grace; That the mention of Jerusalem meant the heavenly city of peace; and that Jericho was the moon shining on Adam’s mortality and the Thieves were talking about the devil and so on. There is danger in looking at parables in this way because no where in scripture does Jesus refer to these things even when he explains them.

Jesus used these stories not to have hidden meaning but so the hearers would be challenged by the status quo and that they would further understand the point he was trying to get across. NT Wright says they were “ ... not simply illustrations that is preachers tricks to decorate an abstract thought...but designed to tease (and) clothe the shocking and revolutionary message about God’s kingdom...

We also need to be aware that the vast majority of the parables were to explain or illuminate the “Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of heaven” and that they were a vehicle that Jesus used to elicit a reaction from the hearers to his invitation and radical and revolutionary call to discipleship.

Parables are not all the same and not all imagery in Jesus teachings are parables. Many sayings are similes or metaphor eg) you are the salt of the earth is not a parable but is a metaphor.

Some parables were like true stories with a beginning middle and end with a clear plot. eg) Lost sheep, prodigal son... Others were illustrations used from everyday life to make a point. eg) The Leaven meal.

Parables are not a direct teaching or in fact even allegories although they look like it at times.

This leaves us with the question of how do we interpret the parables for us in 21st century provincial New Zealand or where ever you are living at this time.

The things to note when reading parables:

1. **The Audience;** was it the pharisees (who were a constant audience) or was it the disciples or the crowds. At times we are not told directly who the audience was but by reading carefully we can often work out by the point of the story or the points of interest that Jesus may have used to connect with his hearers.
2. **The Context:** The context where Jesus uses these stories is crucial. Knowing not only who but the situation that is going on around him is very important to help us understand fully the main point of the parable. The stories would have had a very familiar sound to them to those listening.
3. **The points of interest:** What were those things that the hearers would immediately have seen and taken notice of, or been challenged by
4. **The twist in the tail:** There was often a twist or unexpected turn of events or a pointed question at the end of the story. This was often challenging the status quo or the stance of the religious leaders of the day.
5. **Understand what it meant to them before relating to us today:** We can not make a parable say something to us that is no where near what Jesus had intended his 1st century listeners to hear.
6. **Translate in our Context:** We then can transfer that concept into a context that makes sense to us today. Retelling the story in a modern day context might be helpful here.
7. **Remember that the “kingdom of God “** was the over arching theme of the majority of the parables and to know the teaching of the Kingdom of God through out scripture including the gospels and Sermon on the Mount is essential in making a good sense of the parables.

So enjoy reading the following parables and consider the discipleship challenge and invitation Jesus is calling, not only his original hearers but, us all as we outwork the Kingdom of God in our world today.



1

2

3

I HOPE THIS HAS BEEN HELPFUL IN YOU READING THE PARABLES AND GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THEM.



Further Reading:

1. How to read the Bible for all it’s worth.

By Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart (Chapter 8)

2. Bible Project on Parables.

Look up on the Bible Project website (video / audio)

3. Simply Jesus: a new vision of who he was, what he did and why he Matters.

NT Wright (pp87-88)

4. Rediscovering the Parables

Joachim Jeremias

Parables in Matthew



BIG Idea! The Grace of God

Humility is the key to understanding the upside down Kingdom of God. Not a kingdom of power, might, violence or military force but a kingdom of compassion, humility and love. God's grace is irrespective of status, power, finances or position and is based solely on the generosity of God giving us what we do not and can not deserve or earn. This often means that those who think that they deserve more because of their hard work, social standing or even in a church, are at times the very ones who do not appear to understand and miss the point of the whole deal. This grace is not given in measures of who deserves it more or who has been at it the longest but is all, for all. It can not be bartered or stored up. It can not be measured or nor is it sort of thing one person can have a lot and someone else only a little.

Or as Paul put it in **Ephesians 2**

8For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9not by works, so that no one can boast.

And **Romans 3** ... *this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no distinction, 23for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24and (all) are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*

Therefore there are none who are more important or who are more special in God's eyes. We are all called by his name and enter the family of God on equal footing to receive the inheritance of life in him; freedom from the power of sin and death. He is the one who holds up his end of the bargain even when we do not hold up ours. This story tells us more about the covenantal grace, generously given by God rather than rules to follow to be accepted in God's Kingdom. It echoes the story of a Father running to embrace his wayward son with arms spread wide. Displaying love, forgiveness and grace so freely to the one who least deserved it.



DIGGING Deeper! Context:

In Israelite literature the Israel was often referred to as a vineyard and Isaiah 5 likens God to vineyard owner. This story would have been very appropriate for the people of the day. Waiting in the market square to get work for the day when the crop was ready for harvest and the workers would work a long day to earn a good days pay. Those not chosen would spend the day at the market place hoping someone would employ them. However this parable does not follow the usual social and economic patterns that everyone would expect.

1. This owner cares for the down and outs. 2. Each worker gets the same pay not matter how many hours they worked and are paid first not last as would normally happen. 3. Also the worker who complains about the situation is called "friend". This is the same term Jesus used of a man not dressed in wedding clothes yet wants to come to the wedding Matt 22:12 and of Judas when he betrayed Jesus. It is a term that is an ironical term used when someone is in the wrong. Here the owner shows the contract that was signed by those workers at the beginning of the day.

I do not think that it is a commentary on social justice or employment law but rather an insight into how Jesus sees the kingdom working and what is really important.. God does not enter into a contract where we have to do our work to receive a benefit but enters into a covenant where he chooses to give us everything in the full once we choose to believe. The generosity of the salvation of God is for all people at any time the moment you believe and invite God to be your King.

1

PRAYER POINT

What can you pray for this week, for yourself, your family and friends?

2

ACTION POINT

Ask God to help you see all as he sees them no matter what socio economic or position they might have or not have.

3

MISSION POINT

Are there people, or types of people, that we struggle to care for? Imagine them receiving the fullness of God's generosity?

Start by checking in with how everyone is doing and ask a state of your soul question.



Today's Reading: Matthew 20: 1-16

READ the verses out loud.

THEN and THERE

Try to imagine being the disciples hearing this parable. Why might they be challenged by this?

Read Digging Deeper.

DISCUSS

Why might the Jews have found this parable to be a difficult thing to hear.

QUESTIONS to Consider

1. What sticks out to you about these verses?
2. What does God's grace mean to you?
3. Who was Jesus primarily talking to in this section of Matthew? You may need to track back a page or 2.
4. What does it mean "The first shall be last and the last first"? How do other Bible versions translate this phrase?
5. What does this mean for us, here and now?
6. Compare this to the story Jesus tells in Luke 5: 11-32 What similarities are there and what is the overarching message in both?

PRAY for each other that we would see how God wants us to see and communicate with others.

Parables in Matthew



BIG Idea!

The First shall be Last

In the previous chapters, Jesus established the counter-cultural values of God's Kingdom, with particular attention afforded to Israel's poor and marginalised. Now it was time to deal with Israel's rich and powerful. His intention, however, is not to spite or insult the upper echelons of Jewish society, but to break through their prideful defences by whatever means necessary. To this end, Jesus tells them the parable of the Two Sons. Building upon the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, Jesus presents the Gospel in the simplest terms possible. God is like a loving, generous father. God has many children and, broadly speaking, those children can be divided into two groups; rule-breakers and rule-keepers. The Chief Priests, Elders and Pharisees, to whom Jesus was speaking, belong to the later category, thinking that their rule-keeping will secure them a place in God's Kingdom. Jesus, rejects their presumption. God's Kingdom belongs to the humble. No amount of rule-keeping will earn a place in God's Kingdom, just as no amount of rule-breaking could permanently exclude someone from it. Anyone and everyone who asks for forgiveness, who humbles themselves before the Father, are welcomed into God's family as heirs to His Kingdom.



DIGGING Deeper!

Context

The series of events which lead up to the parable of the Two Sons serve to underscore its meaning. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus is welcomed into Jerusalem. Only, He doesn't gallop into the city riding a mighty war horse, as the messianic model required, but meanders through the city gates atop a humble donkey. This subversion of expectations continues in the Temple. Like the Macabbe's who violently 'cleansed' the Temple from gentile influence 200 years earlier, Jesus performed His own cleansing. This time, however, the messiah-apparent didn't drive out gentiles, but Jews. Clearly, the focus of Christ's ire were not people from outside of God's House, but those who claimed to serve it.

Verses 18-46 of Matthew 21 serve as a kind of commentary on Israel's religious leadership. What begins with the withering of a fig tree, calling back to Adam and Eve's attempts to hide their own iniquity at the fall, ends with dire warnings in the case of the two parables. From the Two Sons story Jesus affirms that the lowest of society will enter His Kingdom ahead of the proud and haughty (calling back to His previous statement that the "last shall be first" from chapter 20), while from the parable of the Tenants Jesus signs off with a withering rebuke "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed (Matt 21:43-44)."



1

PRAYER POINT

What can you pray for this week, for yourself, your family and friends?

2

ACTION POINT

If God's Kingdom cannot be earned, how do I balance good behaviour with God's grace and forgiveness?

3

MISSION POINT

How can we communicate this parable's meaning to those who haven't met Jesus yet?

Start by checking in with how everyone is doing and ask a state of your soul question.

Today's Reading:

Matthew 21: 23-32



the verses out loud.

THEN and THERE

Imagine being raised in a shame and honor culture, only to be told by Jesus that by the values of His Kingdom, those who were regarded as shameful and lowly were far more likely to become heirs in His Kingdom, while those whom society honored for their conduct and status were risked missing out entirely.

Read Digging Deeper.

DISCUSS

How does the parable of the Two Sons relate to modern Christians? Are we in the Church more likely to behave like the first son, or the second son?

QUESTIONS to Consider

1. What sticks out to you about these verses?
2. What do you think about this dynamic between rule-breakers and the rule-keepers?
3. Have you ever associated yourself with either of these attitudes?
4. What is God's solution to these errors?
5. How can we lean into the work God has already done for us, through Jesus, rather than rely on our own works?

PRAY for each other that we would receive a revelation of God's love for us and our world.

Parables in Matthew

BIG Idea!

Tenants v Owners

Matthew continues his realigning of the temple and religious leaders in the following parable. He emphasises, and the religious leaders recognised themselves, that they were not following what God's intention was for leaders of his people. They were blinded by their need to be popular, important and to have power over others and totally missed the point of what it meant to be a leader of God's people. In the story of the wicked farmers or parable of the tenants Jesus likened the priests and pharisees to a bunch of tenants who had been given a vineyard to farm. It was set up to be protected, secure, and fruitful. Yet the tenants did not wish to allow the owner of the vineyard to profit from the harvest and so they choose not to listen to the messengers sent but beat, stoned and ultimately killed them so they didn't have to do what the owner wanted. The son was sent and yet he too was murdered so the tenants might steal the farm and become owners themselves. The message Jesus seems to be saying is that tenants are tenants and not owners and therefore they need to know their place. They are there to serve the masters wishes and as they live in the bountiful land the owner provides they were to produce fruit in the name of the owner and therefore all bounty and harvest belongs to him. This idea of demanding ownership in spite of the benevolence of the owner brings ultimate judgement to the farmers and the very vineyard that they inhabited is given to others while they are banished and left with nothing. We too have the choice to come to God in humility and grace not trying to be the Lord of our own lives but willingly submitting to the will of the one who has gifted us with life. So quickly we try to take back control and be the very ones who would push God away from our lives choosing not to trust him. In Romans 12 we are called to be living sacrifices and the problem with living sacrifices they so often want to take back control and jump off the altar thinking we know better and wanting to be the ultimate owners of our lives even after we have given our lives over to the trust and care of the faithful all creator God.

DIGGING Deeper!

Context:

Jesus in Jerusalem in the final days before the cross addresses the hypocrisy in temple and religious leaders. Ushering in a new temple, new kingdom and new way for God's people. Using the imagery of the fig tree with leaves but no fruit that he curses for its lack there of. All show and no true life or fruit. To emphasise these things Jesus uses stories making connections with old testament scriptures that would have added extra weight to those listening, in particular the priests and pharisees. This particular story is almost a direct retell of Isaiah chapter 5 where Isaiah speaks of the vineyard being the people of God. It even includes the vineyard having watchtower, winepress, walls and hedges, imagery of protection fruitfulness and guarding over the enemies schemes. The watchtower is also an image used as a position to seek and hear from God, as a place of prayer and listening to the directions of the God who planted them. In the Isaiah prophesy the fruit was oppression instead of justice and violence instead of righteousness. The religious leaders, would have made the direct link to this story and no doubt felt the weight of accusation and failure in not being what God had intended. Yet they still wanted to get rid of the son (Jesus) and arrest and ultimately kill him so they could have their way rather than submit to the all creator God. Ezekiel 34 speaks of the evil shepherds of Israel and how they feed themselves rather than the flock and how they eat the best cuts of meat and drink the richest milk, and not tend to the injured and lost but be cruel while looking after themselves and leaving the flock to starve. Therefore says the lord "I will take away the right to feed the flock". This is the threat that Jesus says will happen to those who treat the vineyard so selfishly, they will lose the right to lead and farm and that will be given to others who will produce proper fruit. Emphasising as in Ps 118 that the rejected perfect stone will become the cornerstone that the new temple and kingdom will be built on with other living stones. (1 Peter 2: 6) That is the lives of all who truly submit to God and come in humility, repentance and grace to show and produce the true fruit to all as they are filled with the Spirit of God and display the fruit of the Spirit. (Gal 5:22). These last ones will be the first and the ones to rule in the upside down Kingdom of Jesus the messiah king. These tenants, become children of God (Romans 8) by His invitation and the indwelling of the spirit yet still having the stance and attitude of servants and stewards of the abundance and life that is gifted to them by God for the benefit of others in the world we dwell..

1

PRAYER POINT

Ask what God might be saying to you about what you still own in your life?

2

ACTION POINT

Discuss with someone else what you think God is saying you about this parable.

3

MISSION POINT

If we are to be true stewards of what God has given us. How might we treat others in our spaces to reveal God's love to them?

Start by checking in with how everyone is doing and ask a state of your soul question.



Today's Reading:
Matthew 21: 33-46

READ the verses out loud.

THEN and THERE

Try to imagine what it felt like for the pharisees once they realised that Jesus was talking about them. Discuss. How would you respond?

Read Digging Deeper.

DISCUSS

Look back over this whole chapter and discuss how the passages all fit together and what Matthew might be trying to get us to understand.

QUESTIONS to Consider

1. What sticks out to you the most about these verses?
2. What was the issue Jesus had with the priests and pharisees?
3. Why do you think Jesus used so many stories about agriculture, vineyards, farmers and sons?
4. How do we try to be owners of our lives rather than Stewards or tenants?
5. How do you balance the aspiration to be the best in your field and doing things with excellence with still being good tenants or stewards and not having an ownership mentality?
6. What do you think God is saying specifically to you through this parable?

PRAY for each other that we would see how God wants us to see and communicate with others.

Parables in Matthew



BIG Idea!

The Kings Invitation:

Ancient wedding invitations were understood to have been sent in much the same manner as they are today. Guests would respond to an initial 'save the date', before receiving a specific invitation to attend the wedding feast some time later. This would mean these VIP guests were not refusing to attend a wedding they previously knew nothing about, but a wedding they had already committed to. Their time-sensitive excuses, therefore, serve only to underscore the absurdity of their behaviour.

The guests' treatment of the King's servants, however, go beyond the absurd and into the ridiculous. Indeed, a lesser person could have made their point using the theme of dishonour alone, yet Jesus describes the guests as a people in full rebellion, necessitating nothing less than the judgement that the King passes down.

While the allegory between the King and God, the King's Son and Jesus are clear, it would be a mistake to assume that Jesus is therefore implying God will deal with Israel in the same manner as the fictional king. Rather, Jesus' intention is to show the seriousness of Israel's rebellious past. In the same way that an ancient king was expected to eliminate such rebellious subjects, so God could reasonably be expected to reject His own rebellious people.

Yet, in the second half of this parable reveals God's true character. The King's invitation is extended to the world, regardless of their reputation. Notably, these 'ordinary' guests gratefully took up the King's offer. Only one guest is noted for his lack of wedding clothes. His lack of proper attire likely had nothing to do with his wealth, as garments were often supplied by the host. This is a guest wanting to join the feast on their own terms. They were, in a sense, a wedding crasher, wanting to join the feast, without having to join in the celebration. This dishonourable behaviour is, once again, dealt with in a manner that would have seemed normal to Christ's ancient audience.

Start by checking in with how everyone is doing and ask a state of your soul question.



Today's Reading:

Matthew 22:1-14

READ the verses out loud.

THEN and THERE

Imagine being a religious leader listening to Jesus. What would you think of such a story?

Read Digging Deeper.

DISCUSS

Within the story, who do you think the King's Son is engaged to? Is it just a narrative device, or could it be the Church?

QUESTIONS to Consider

1. What sticks out to you about these verses?
2. What sticks out to you in this passage?
3. Do you think of this story as a hopeful story, or a warning? Why?
4. Is there a character in this story you relate to?
5. Does this parable leave you with unanswered questions? If so, what are they?

PRAY for each other that we would see how God wants us to be those who invite others into finding out about the amazing relationship we have in Jesus.

DIGGING Deeper!

Context:

The parable of the Wedding Banquet follows on from a queue of parables aimed directly at Israel's religious elite. Beginning in chapter 20, Jesus tells a series of escalating stories, all featuring a landowner and his dealings with those in his employ, or his sons. The first parable, the Workers in the Vineyard, centres around a generous employment scheme, the second features two disobedient sons, while the third sees the landowners' tenants commit murder. By the time we arrive at the Wedding Banquet in chapter 22, it should be no surprise that the narrative has escalated to the ultimate landowner, the king.

These heightened stakes reflect Jesus' evidently growing concern that Israel's 'teachers' would not repent. His use of such narrative drama, shows us the lengths Jesus was and is willing to use to try and get through to those on a collision course with reality.

1

PRAYER POINT

What can you pray for this week, for yourself, your family and friends?

2

ACTION POINT

If the invitation of the King is just that, an invitation, how do we know that we have responded to it?

3

MISSION POINT

If we imagine ourselves as the King's servants for a moment, how do we go about inviting people to the wedding feast in a modern setting?

Taxes in Matthew



BIG Idea!

ULTIMATE WORTH

In an effort to discredit Jesus, the Pharisees hatch a plan to politically smoke Jesus out. The issue they chose was not so ordinary as taxation in general, but a specific annual tax which could only be paid with a specific coin known as a denarius. The coin bore the image of Caesar, inscribed with the self-aggrandising title “Divine Augustus”. This coin was to be paid to Rome as an acknowledgement of the ‘privilege’ it was to be a subject of Caesar.

Following the introduction of the tax, some 25 years prior, a revolt was led by a man named Judas the Galilean. Although the revolt was ultimately put down, Judas left a lasting legacy in the Jewish psyche, cleansing the temple in Jerusalem of all Gentile influence and declaring Israel to be God’s kingdom, not Rome’s.

The question put to Jesus, therefore, was incredibly dangerous. If Jesus rejected the tax then the authorities would accuse Him of rabble-rousing. On the other hand, if Jesus simply accepted the tax, then His own claims about the Kingdom of God would ring hollow, suggesting He was too frightened to challenge Rome’s oppression and, therefore, would be labelled a false messiah. All of this, of course, in the wake of Jesus’ own temple cleansing, albeit in a manner vastly different to the messianic claimants who came before Him.

Jesus’ answer rejects political simplicity, political primacy and political complacency. Indeed, Jesus offers a nuanced perspective which reflects the complex nature of so many political issues. He provides no silver bullet, no ‘righteous’ answer. He reminds us that God does not belong to a political party. Instead, Jesus deftly reorientates our perspective. Our values should not be shaped by politics, rather our politics should be shaped by Kingdom values. Pointedly, Jesus asks the question “Who are you more concerned to repay? The emperor of Rome, or God?”. For just as a denarius bears the image of its creator, so we all bear the image of our creator, personified in the character of Jesus. A rebel from Galilee, come to lead a very different kind of revolution.



DIGGING Deeper!

Context:

It should be noted that on this occasion, discussing this sensitive issue, the Pharisees do not personally question Jesus. Rather, the Pharisees’ own students are sent to face the great teacher, complimented by members of a political sect known as the Herodians. As their name would suggest, the Herodians were supporters of Herod’s Kingdom. This was a position not shared by the Pharisees, nor the majority of the petty king’s subjects (this was in no small part due to Herod Antipas’ scandalous marriage to his own niece and recent execution of John the Baptist). However, there seems to have existed enough Jews who either disagreed with this sentiment, or else valued the authority of a Jewish king (competency not withstanding) over any form of foreign rule. Either way, the inclusion of the Herodians in the Pharisees plan speaks to their willingness to work with historical adversaries to put an end to Jesus, as well as the convoluted nature of the political issue at hand. So blurred were the lines between ‘church’ and ‘state’, that answering one way or the other could see Jesus labelled as a rebel, or even as a Roman collaborator. All of this within a societal tinderbox, just waiting for an excuse to revisit their grievances upon the occupying forces who were levying these exploitative taxes.

1

PRAYER POINT

What can you pray for this week, for yourself, your family and friends?

2

ACTION POINT

Try asking yourself these difficult questions “Am I shaped more by politics than I am by the Gospel? How can I be sure?”

3

MISSION POINT

How should Christians engage in political discourse? What separates a Christian politician from a secular one?

Start by checking in with how everyone is doing and ask a state of your soul question.



Today’s Reading: Matthew 22: 15-22

READ the verses out loud.

THEN and THERE

Considering how much emotion we see in modern politics, how much more emotional would this conversation have been, only 25 years removed from a deeply traumatic episode in Jewish history?

Read Digging Deeper.

DISCUSS

Given the contemporary relevance of taxation today, what lessons can we take from Christ’s response?

QUESTIONS to Consider

1. What sticks out to you about these verses?
2. What do you think of Caesars tax?
3. How can I model Christ in my approach to political discourse?
4. How should the Church go about balancing political questions?
5. How do we avoid the errors of political primacy and/or political complacency?
6. What does it look like to be concerned with social justice? How is this part of the Kingdom of God?
7. What might God be challenging us in as we study this scripture?

PRAY for each other that we see with God’s eyes and have grace and peace for others who think differently to us.