

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

A 12-WEEK STUDY



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 **CROSSWAY®**

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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WEEK 1: OVERVIEW



Getting Acquainted

If you are familiar with the Gospels, you know that parables play a prominent part in Jesus' teaching. Depending on how one defines the Greek term *parabolē*,¹ which occurs fifty-two times in the New Testament (mostly in Matthew and Luke), the Gospels record up to seventy parables, including forty narrative ones.² This study will focus on some of the most famous narrative parables, such as the parables of the sower and the seed, the good Samaritan, the rich fool, and the prodigal son. This study will also feature a variety of different types of parables, such as parables of judgment, extended comparisons, and example stories.

Most of us enjoy reading and hearing Jesus' parables. However, we often struggle as much as his first disciples, who asked "what" a particular "parable meant" (Luke 8:9). And just as those first disciples asked Jesus how to pray ("Lord, teach us to pray," 11:1), so we need his help in understanding the "secrets of the kingdom of God" revealed in the parables (8:10). We trust that this Bible study will prove invaluable in your quest for such knowledge through the eye-opening work of the Holy Spirit.

Placing Them in the Larger Story

Jesus' parables are not merely simple, short narratives that teach morals. They are similes and stories that help us understand the nature of the kingdom of God and point us to the King of that kingdom. Thus, when we study the

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

individual parables, we must think about how the parables relate to how Jesus fulfills the promises of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and how he embodies various characters in his stories—the heaven-sent Son, the bridegroom, the king upon his glorious throne, the judge on judgment day.

Key Verse

When his disciples asked [Jesus] what this parable meant, he said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand’” (Luke 8:9–10).

Date and Historical Background

Mark (the earliest Gospel) was written in perhaps the mid- to late-50s AD, roughly twenty-five years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Mark contains only two narrative parables (found also in Matthew and Luke), while Matthew contains ten unique parables and Luke fifteen. Jesus’ parables have appealed to billions of people living over two millennia. Yet it is important to understand them first as set within their original context (first-century Palestine) and audience (mostly Jews). How would the original audience have understood the parables? And, since Christ’s parables were intentionally provocative, what would have shocked his first hearers? For example, a Samaritan as the hero in a story about loving others would have shocked Jewish cultural and spiritual sensibilities.

As You Get Started

As stated above, Jesus preached around forty narrative parables.² There is some precedent in the Old Testament for Jesus’ teaching style. Read Judges 9:7–15; 2 Samuel 12:1–4; 2 Kings 14:9–10; Ezekiel 17:2–10; and Isaiah 5:1–7. How do these forms and stories resemble what you know of Christ’s parables?

Why did Jesus teach in parables? This question will be answered by Jesus in the next study. But, without turning there for the answer, give your best answer now.

What does Mark mean when he writes that Christ Jesus “did not speak to them without a parable” (Mark 4:34)? Let these next three questions help you find the answer. First, to whom does the pronoun “them” refer in the immediate context? How many full-scale narrative parables are recorded in Mark’s Gospel? And, would you categorize the following statements as parables: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (1:15)? “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men” (1:17)? “Son, your sins are forgiven” (2:5)?

What are you looking forward to in your study of the parables?

Jesus begins the parable of the sower with this exhortation: “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow” (Mark 4:3). A dozen times Jesus calls his listeners to

“hear” (e.g., “Hear another parable”; Matt. 21:33) and twice to “hear . . . and understand” (15:10; Mark 7:14). How do Jesus’ calls to listen help us know how to pray as we begin this study?

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you engage in this study of Jesus’ parables. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight or underline these to review again in the future.

Definitions

¹ **Parable** – Robert Kinney offers this definition: “A parable is a simple and usually narrative story, grounded in the real world, and used to provoke the audience on a spiritual (or moral) matter or even to make a spiritual (or moral) point.” The word itself is a combination of the Greek preposition *para* (“beside”) and the verb *ballō* (“to cast”), thus literally meaning to “toss next to” or “to place alongside.” A parable makes a comparison: God is like the longing and loving father who forgives and embraces a prodigal son who returns home; the growth of the kingdom of God is like the growth of a mustard seed. The two compared realities are alike in some way, and together they teach theological truths and spiritual lessons.

² **Narrative parables** – Symbolic stories that are one type of parable used by Christ. Jesus taught with three types of parables. First are his aphorisms (“Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?” Luke 6:39). Second are similes (“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field”; Matt. 13:44). Third are symbolic stories (the parable of the sower), also called narrative parables.

WEEK 2: THE SOWER

Mark 4:1–20



The Place of the Passage

Jesus’ parable of the sower is found in Matthew (13:1–23), Mark (4:1–20), and Luke (8:4–15). In Mark’s Gospel the parable is told during Jesus’ later Galilean ministry (Mark 3:13–6:6), alongside the only concentrated section on parables in the whole Gospel. Both this parable and the others in Mark 4 help to explain what the kingdom of God¹ is like.

The Big Picture

This parable is told both to encourage Jesus’ disciples (that people will receive “the word,” Mark 4:14; that is, “the word of God,”² 7:13) and to inform them to expect opposition and rejection to the gospel of the kingdom.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, Mark 4:1-20. Then think through and write your own notes on the following questions. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on pages 1899-1900; online at www.esv.org.)

As Jesus “began to teach” beside the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:1), why might “a very large crowd” have gathered? What has Jesus said and done in the first three chapters to draw such attention?

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Most people in the crowd, even those who were not farmers, would be familiar with sowing seed. How would these first hearers have understood the parable? What do you suppose they thought Jesus was teaching in this parable?

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Mark records that Jesus “was teaching [the crowd] in parables” (Mark 4:2) and later that Jesus “did not speak” to the crowd on that day “without a parable” (v. 34). According to Jesus in Mark 4:10-12, why does he teach in parables? See also verses 33-34 and especially Matthew 13:11-17.

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In Mark 4:12, Jesus offers a condensed quote of Isaiah 6:9-10. Turn to Isaiah and read the quote in full. Then skim through Isaiah 1-5 and answer two questions. First, what are God’s people in Isaiah’s time doing that is upsetting God? Second, how is Jesus’ preaching in parables similar to Isaiah’s ministry?

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In the Gospel of Mark, how has Jesus and his message been received thus far? How does such reception shed light on the themes found in the parable of the sower?

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For most parables Jesus does not reveal their symbolism, or second level of meaning. But in Mark 4:14-20 he does so for everything except “the sower.” Fill in the chart below, including who you think the sower is and what “the word” (in the context of Mark and the New Testament) is.

Detail	Referent
Sower	
Seed	The word
Path	
Birds	
Rocky ground	
Thorn-infested soil	
Good soil	

How does Jesus' explanation above help us interpret the parables he does not explain?

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Write down at least one lesson we can learn from each key detail. For example, we might say that, just as the sower sowed seed, we should share the gospel, knowing that God promises remarkable growth despite many possible hindrances.

Seed	
Path	
Birds	
Rocky ground	
Thorn-infested soil	
Good soil	

How do the parables of the growing seed (4:26-29) and the mustard seed (4:30-32) expand upon the theme of positive reception of the word (the good soil)?

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What is the central application of the parable of the sower?

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When was the last time you shared the gospel with a nonbeliever? What was the response? How should this parable give you confidence to share the gospel in the future?

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Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

GOSPEL GROWTH. When Jesus speaks of the grain in the good soil “yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold” (Mark 4:8; compare v. 20), he is describing an overabundant harvest. In ancient Israel it was difficult to produce consistently good harvests. If a farmer got sevenfold what he planted, he would be satisfied. To produce tenfold would be considered a good harvest, and twentyfold an excellent harvest; to receive thirtyfold, sixtyfold, or a hundredfold would be an unfathomable yield. With this amazing harvest in mind, Jesus ends his parable on a very positive note. Those who abide in him and his word bear fruit. Some a lot of fruit. Others even more than a lot. Still others many bushelsful.

BLESSED EYES. To the self-righteous and those who have met Jesus' ministry with indifference (Matt. 11:20), misunderstanding (12:46), unbelief (13:58), or hostile opposition (12:10, 14, 24), “the secrets of the kingdom of heaven” (13:11) remain hidden. Jesus' parables serve, in some way, as divine judgments. For the disciples, however, parables serve a different purpose. Parables do not conceal the truth but reveal it. They are expressions of God's gracious mercy. To those who persist in unbelief, the mystery of the gospel of the kingdom is not seen, but, to those receptive to what God is doing in Jesus, parables are like looking at stained-glass windows from the inside while the sun pours through. For the twelve, Jesus affirms their unique spiritual privilege: “Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear” (13:16). They have been chosen to be scribes “trained” by Jesus to grasp and give to others the “treasure” of “the kingdom of heaven” (13:52).

Whole-Bible Connections

SEEING BUT NOT SEEING. In Isaiah 6:9–10 God warned the prophet that many would grasp the content of his message yet reject its truth. In Mark 4:12 (and parallels in Matt. 13:13–15; Luke 8:10) Jesus cites Isaiah to show that his parables have a similar function. They are simple stories full of everyday images, yet they require us to admit that we—like Isaiah’s audience (see Isaiah 1–4)—are rebels in need of God’s forgiveness. To embrace genuinely such truth requires insight that only God’s Spirit can give (1 Cor. 2:12–14).

THE MYSTERY OF THE KINGDOM. Jesus launched his ministry with the startling announcement that “the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15; Matt. 4:17). Yet the kingdom’s arrival did not match people’s expectations. Two things were expected to occur immediately and simultaneously: God would save his people and judge his enemies. But Mark 4 tells us that the kingdom of heaven has indeed arrived in Jesus, but it will not be fully consummated until the distant future. Like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a tree, the kingdom begins small and grows into its full expression over time (4:31–32).

Theological Soundings

TRUE AND FALSE FAITH. Jesus’ parable of the sower shows four different responses to his message. The first one “hears the word of the kingdom” but “does not understand it” (Matt. 13:19; compare Mark 4:15). The second responds joyfully but then falls away³ (Mark 4:16–17). The third endures for a while but “proves unfruitful” (v. 19). Only the fourth proves to be fruitful (v. 20). What might appear on the surface to be faith may prove to be false. Only the fourth kind of hearers are genuine, as evidenced by their fruitfulness. As Jesus says, “The tree is known by its fruit” (Matt. 12:33–35; see 7:15–20).

SATAN. From the first pages of Genesis, human sin is presented as a betrayal of God by means of man’s placing his trust in the lies of Satan instead of trusting God’s word. In our modern secular age, Christians are eager to defend the reality of a good God, but we often neglect the reality of “the evil one” (Matt. 13:19), who seeks to “steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10). In this parable, Satan destroys by coming and stealing away the word that is sown (Matt. 13:19) in people who initially receive the gospel.

GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY. Jesus repeatedly teaches that God is ultimately sovereign over the ability of people to understand his revelation. The ability to “hear” spiritually the message of the kingdom is a gift that God gives only to some (Matt. 13:10–11). At the same time, he calls *all* to “hear” his message (v. 18; similarly, see 11:25–27). Throughout the Bible

we see that God is sovereign over all things but that humans are nonetheless responsible for their actions. The reality of both truths together in Scripture means that we must not reject one to preserve the other. God is sovereign, and humans are responsible. As difficult as it may be for us to hold these twin truths together, they are ultimately compatible, not contradictory.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Mark 4:1–20 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Make notes below on the *Personal Implications* for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) the passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

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2. Whole-Bible Connections

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3. Theological Soundings

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4. Mark 4:1–20

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Jesus' parables. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight or underline these to review again in the future.

Definitions

- ¹ **Kingdom of God** – The rule of God manifested in the long-awaited restoration of his people and indeed the whole world, in which God will reign over the glad submission of all people.
- ² **The word of God** – In Mark, the message of the gospel (note 1:1, 14–15) or the saving news of what God is doing in Jesus to restore the world. The word of God, we learn in Mark 4, is powerful and fruitful, yet also dividing and alienating.
- ³ **Falling away** – A metaphorical way of describing either a temporary renunciation (“You will all fall away”; Mark 14:27) or a permanent apostasy (see Hebrews 6) that leads to eternal judgment (3:12; 12:15). Only Jesus can keep believers from falling away (see Luke 22:31; John 16:1).