

Jesus teaches about the Kingdom of God  
*THE STORY*, pages 277-283

Mark 4:1-33 – pages 277 – 78

This series of five parables is arranged in a type of reverse parallelism called a “chiasm.”

- A. Outside scene: Parable of the soils
- B. Outside scene: Explanation of parable of the soils
- C. Inside scene: Parable of the lamp
- C.’ Inside scene: Parable of the measures
- B.’ Outside scene: Parable of the seed growing by itself
- A.’ Outside scene: Parable of the mustard seed

It is possible that Jesus may have told the parables this way, but it is more likely that Jesus told parables here and there throughout his ministry and the Gospel writers arranged them as they saw fit. We say this because the parables are in different places in different Gospels and John doesn’t have any of these parables. The word “parable” in Greek means a comparison. It is a rhetorical device. Jesus’s parables compare ordinary experiences to the Kingdom of God and its coming.

The parable of the different kinds of soil is (shown by the explanation Jesus gives) about why the good news of the Kingdom meets with such varied responses. It is not an exhortation to “be good soil,” “be a good seed.” Jesus says that “the farmer sows the word.” In that case there is nothing wrong with the seed (preaching). Jesus’s followers are supposed to spread the good news of the Kingdom everywhere but to understand that some of it won’t take root because it will be heard by various kinds of people. Hard roads will not grow grain because Satan will grab the seed before it has a chance to grow. Rocky soil will not grow grain because it’s more rock than soil (one thinks of Simon, whose nickname is Rocky). Seed that can’t compete with worry, “the deceitfulness of wealth,” and “the desires for other things” will not grow. But when the word falls on good soil it will produce in a level of abundance never seen in ancient agriculture—it’s a miracle. The followers of Jesus can’t control the quality of the soil. All they are supposed to do is just keep tossing the word out there and leave the results to God.

The parable of the lamp is similar. Let it shine, followers of Jesus! Don’t cover it up.

The parable of the measure is pretty straightforward: The more you give, away, the more you receive from God. If you don't empty your measure, God can't fill it up. This corresponds to the parable of the good and bad investors. In that story, the person who hoarded the master's money without taking any risks to make it grow had it taken from him.

The parable in the third full paragraph on page 278 is found only in Mark. It reinforces the idea that the Kingdom of God is just that---OF GOD. The followers of Jesus plant the seeds widely but if they grow, they grow because God provides the conditions for their growth.

The mustard seed is tiny and does not look very promising, but if it is planted, it will grow bigger than expected. Similarly Kingdom preaching may appear not to be making a difference, but the followers of Jesus are told, "Don't give up; God will make it grow to a surprisingly large plant that will shelter many.

We are told at the bottom of 278 that Jesus "explained everything" to his disciples. All the way to the end of Mark, however, most of them seem to be pretty rocky and weedy. It is only in Acts, after the coming of the Holy Spirit, that they start to show some promise.

#### Luke 15 – top of 279 to middle of 280: Lost and found

The audience of these three parables is specified at the beginning. They are told to teachers in competition with Jesus for the hearts and minds of the people. The rival teachers focus on the importance of the witness of the company one keeps. Jesus fails this test. Jesus focuses on God's extravagant love poured out on the undeserving.

The answer to Jesus's questions about the shepherd and the woman with ten coins should be, "No! nobody would risk losing ninety-nine sheep for the sake of one." "No! no woman would spend all day hunting for one coin when she has to walk an hour each way to get water, and has to look after the children and cook, wash, and see to her husband's needs. No way!" But God is not like us. He throws a party in heaven for one lost and lonely person who turns to him.

The parable of the loving father makes the same point. Again the response of the ancient listeners would be, "No! No father would divide his property while he is still alive. No father would put up with that level of impertinence from a son. And certainly no father would run to meet the loser when he comes back. Fathers, especially landowners, are dignified. The mother might run to meet her son but the father would sit "enthroned" in the house until the loser son came groveling back. The father would let him finish his speech—the whole business

about how he is not worthy to be called a son. The father would agree with him and let him suffer his humiliation for the rest of his life. He asked for it. He had his chance and he blew it.

In no parables is one supposed to make a point-for-point comparison with God. For example, we are not to suppose that God doesn't care about strong believers (the 99 sheep) and cares only for the one lost person. One of the strongest comparisons in Luke 15 is between the rival teachers at the beginning of the chapter, who object to the company Jesus keeps, and the characters in the story who throw wild parties to celebrate the finding of one sheep, one coin, one son. The questions these parables raise is, "If you religious people were in tune with God, you would be rejoicing to see tax collectors and sinners coming to Jesus. Why are you complaining instead? You say no one would act like the father who welcomes his son back. Maybe not, but God does and heaven throws a party."

The older son represents the rival teachers. They have served God faithfully. Jesus does not deny that. But by comparison he suggests that they could have had more joy if they had asked for it ("everything I have is yours" – page 280) and if they had a close relationship with their Father they would have been as happy as he was to see the son come back.

There is a common pattern of injecting sex into a story when it is not there. The narrator's comment about the younger son's spending habits is, "wild" living in *THE STORY*, literally, "wasteful" living. It is his elder brother who invents the story that he has spent the money "with prostitutes" (280). This tells you more about what the older brother wants to do than what the younger brother actually has done.

But the father is also gentle with his recalcitrant older son, going out to him, not summoning him into his presence for a rebuke. This is how God treats us: He wants all his children at the party.

### **Luke 10:25-37 – The Good Samaritan**

The "expert in the law" is not hearing "the great commandment" for the first time. Love God, love your neighbor had been the summary of Torah for a long time in the teaching of the Rabbis. Everyone in this story is "going down" from Jerusalem to Jericho, not up from Jericho to Jerusalem, so the priest and the Levite are not on their way to perform their duties. They could have stopped, but didn't. But when Jesus asks "Which one of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" the "expert in the law"

can't bring himself to answer, "the Samaritan." He responds, "the one who had mercy on him." The person of the wrong race with the wrong religion is the one who loved his neighbor as himself. No wonder the legal expert choked on his answer. The two religious professionals knew those verses from the Old Testament. They could have rattled them off if someone had asked them, "What's the summary of the Torah?" Knowing is not transformational. Emotion is not transformational either. They might have felt pity for the man as he lay there. They might shed a tear, as we do when we watch TV coverage of victimization. What they did, however, was nothing. Transformation happens when we develop the habit of allowing Kingdom opportunities to interrupt us.

Jesus says, "Go and do likewise." Go and interrupt your routine for the broken person right in front of your face, whether he deserves it or not. Remember that the Samaritan came along after the robbers had left. For all he knew, the beaten man in the road might have been a robber against whom a well-armed person had successfully defended himself under the "stand your ground" provision. The Samaritan did not ask how the man got hurt, if he deserved to be beaten up, if he had health insurance or even if he were a decoy so the robbers could jump the Samaritan. The man was in pain and the Samaritan took care of him and left him in the care of another who would take good care as well. What the audience has to ask themselves is, "should I believe everything I hear about (insert here the people you are most suspicious of)?"

#### Excerpts from Matthew 5-7 – The Sermon on the Mount - pages 281-283

Matthew has collected a large amount of teaching material from the Jesus tradition and constructed from it what we call "The Sermon on the Mount." We know that the words are Jesus's but the construction and order of material is Matthew's because this material is found in a different order in Luke and Luke says, "He came down with them and stood on a level place . . .and said, 'Blessed are you who are poor . . .'" Matthew's location of this long speech on a mountain reflects his interest in showing that just as Moses received the Torah on a mountain, so Jesus reinterpreted the meaning of Torah on a mountain.

**Spend some time talking in your group about people you have known were/are "poor in spirit," "meek," etc. and what the phrases like "they will inherit the earth," and "they will be called children of God," might mean. Where have you seen the truth of these "beatitudes" (from Latin *beatus*, "blessed")? Have you known someone about whom others have "falsely said all kinds of evil" because she or he did what they believed Jesus wanted done?**

The second paragraph on the top of 282 is a variant of the parable of the lamp on 278. **How is this version of the saying different?** Notice that when others “see your good deeds,” the result is that they “glorify your Father in heaven.” The result is not “and you will get a star in your crown,” or “God will like you better,” or “people will know you are a good Christian.” The purpose of the Christian life is to glorify God.

The next time you pray publicly, take note of how much of your prayer is really directed at God and how much of it is directed at the congregation: “Lord, we know that you want us to . . .” How much of it is religious phrases that just “sound like prayer”? “Lord God, heavenly Father, we come this morning in the humblest way we know how, etc., etc.” What we call “The Lord’s Prayer” on page 282 suggests that God wants to be talked to in plain language.

On pages 282-283, notice that the last comparison, “everyone who . . . is like” is exactly the reverse of what we think. Jesus says that security comes from not storing up savings in the bank, not worrying about future food supplies, clothing, or other practical things, but putting God’s kingdom first and letting God look after the particulars. This is hard to do, but Jesus claims that the person who collects the least has his house built on a rock.

**Talk in your group about what in the world this means and whether you believe it or not. At least we can all agree that “Each day has enough trouble of its own” (page 283).**

### Reflections on Christian maturity

Think about the parable of the lost son on pages 279 – 280. The younger son would be the sort of person about whom we might say, “He got jail-house religion!” Based on this parable, would you say that Jesus is skeptical of the faith of those who turn to him when they have nothing left?

It is extremely important to make the distinction between God and us when it comes to situations like the parable of the lost son. God forgives over and over again and God receives back those who turn away from God over and over. But human parents are not God. Sometimes the mental and physical health of the majority of the family means that the “prodigal” cannot be received back for the umpteenth time. Sometimes taking the prodigal back is not even good for the prodigal herself. We can keep on forgiving and we can keep on loving, but often we cannot keep on putting ourselves and others at risk. God, who is never at risk, does not have that limitation. Often the best thing for a habitual prodigal is to discover that he has nowhere to go but to God.