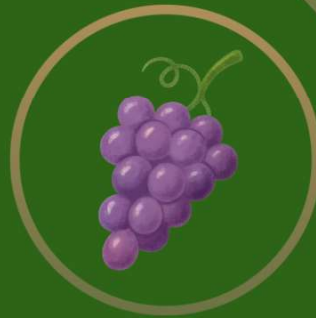




# THE PARABLES OF CHRIST



A Lenten  
Supper and Study



**Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church**

## THE PARABLES OF CHRIST

### A 5-Week Lenten Supper and Study (Spring 2026)

#### Week 1: Introduction and the Parables of the Kingdom

**Look at the front cover. Can you name the parables represented in each image?**

- Lost Sheep
- Wheat and the Tares
- Lost Coin
- The Dragnet
- Pearl of Great Price
- Laborers in the Vineyard or The Wicked Husbandmen
- The Ten Maidens
- The Leaven or the Friend at Midnight
- The Sower or the Growing Seed

**What are some other parables of Jesus you can name off the top of your head?**

**What is a parable?**

A parable is an illustration or story that uses concrete details to communicate a spiritual reality.

A parable, at its most basic level, is a **comparison**. It uses an image (or a full-blown story) as a way of getting at a deeper reality.

“And Jesus asked, “What is the Kingdom of God **like**? And to what shall I **compare** it? It is like...” (Luke 13:18).

Parables are fictional stories, not descriptions of actual events. But just because they are fictional does not mean they are untrue!

## **Parables in the Old Testament**

The most famous parable in the OT is the story of the poor man and his ewe lamb, told by Nathan to King David to convict him of his sin of murder and adultery (“Thou art the man”).

The parable in this context is used to communicate to David a truth he might not be open to hearing in a more direct fashion. We’ll see the same principle at work in the parables of Jesus: they are used to communicate truths which might otherwise be misunderstood or resisted if presented more directly.

Some of the prophets like Ezekiel acted out bizarre scenarios that communicated God’s message to the people of Israel— these performances are in some sense parables also.

## **Parables in the ministry of Christ**

Teaching is a primary activity of the ministry of Christ, along with miracle-working and exorcism. Jesus often gives straightforward didactic teaching (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount, the discourses in St. John’s Gospel), but parables make up a large part of his recorded teaching.

Matthew 13:34-35:

“All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet: “I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world ” [Psalm 78].

Discussion Question: Why do you think Jesus taught in parables?

- Relatability
- Communicating truths using familiar experiences
- They involve people in the story

## **The purpose of the parables**

*Matthew 13:10-15:* Then the disciples came and said to Jesus, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to him who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says:

‘You shall indeed hear but never understand,  
and you shall indeed see but never perceive.

For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing,  
and their eyes they have closed,  
lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears,  
and understand with their heart,  
and turn for me to heal them.’

Jesus is quoting Isaiah 6, which seems to suggest that God is sending Isaiah to the people *in order* to make them not understand. This harder meaning seems to be the sense of Jesus’ quotation in Mark’s Gospel (4:11-12)— that Jesus is telling the parables *so that* the people will not understand and be healed. But in Matthew’s Gospel, the text says that the people do not understand and *therefore* will not be healed.

So which is it? Is Jesus telling parables *so that* the people will not understand or *because* they will not understand?

### **“The secret of the Kingdom”**

The Kingdom of God, as proclaimed and ushered in by Jesus, is a reality whether people know about it or not. Because it takes spiritual insight to perceive spiritual realities, the Kingdom is indeed a secret to most people: it is hidden to those whose hearts have grown dull.

If Jesus were to proclaim the truth to a people who were not ready for it or resistant to it, they would just reject his teaching. But if he gives them a story to think about and turn over in their minds and hearts, the secret of the Kingdom might be revealed to them. The process of trying to make sense of the parables *in itself* helps soften and prepare the heart to receive truth.

**Parables are used to communicate truths which might be misunderstood or resisted if presented more directly.**

The parables, therefore, are used by Jesus to reach a people whose hearts have grown dull. They are not difficult *so that* people will not understand; they are difficult so that people must work at them and therefore have a better chance at understanding. As Jesus says elsewhere, “Nothing is hidden except to be made known, and nothing is concealed that will not be brought to light” (*Matthew 10:26*).

**How many parables of Jesus are there?**

This depends on how broad one’s definition of a parable is. Some teachings of Jesus are metaphorical illustrations, while others are clearly parables and identified as such in the Gospel text. There are at least 30. The list below numbers 34.

### **The Parable of...**

#### **Parables found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke**

- The Sower
- The Lamp under a Bushel
- The Mustard Seed
- The Wicked Tenants
- The Budding Fig Tree
- The Strong Man Bound

#### **Parables found in Matthew and Luke**

- The Lost Sheep
- The Wedding Feast (or Great Banquet)
- The Talents/Minas
- The Leaven

### **Parables found only in Matthew**

- The Wheat and the Weeds (or Tares) (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43)
- The Hidden Treasure
- The Pearl of Great Price (Matt 13:44-46)
- The Dragnet (or Fishing Net) (Matt 13:47-50)
- The Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-35)
- The Two Sons (Matt 21:28-32)
- The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16)
- The Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matt 25:1-13)

### **Parables found only in Mark**

- The Growing Seed (Mark 4:26-29)

### **Parables found only in Luke**

- The Two Debtors (Luke 7:41-42)
- The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)
- The Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8)
- The Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21)
- The Faithful or Unfaithful Slave (Luke 12:35-48)
- The Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9)
- The Honored Seat (Luke 14:7-11)
- The Tower Builder and the King Preparing for War (Luke 14:28-33)
- The Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)
- The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)
- The Unjust Steward (or Dishonest Manager) (Luke 16:1-9)
- The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)
- The Importunate Widow (Luke 18:1-8)
- The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14)

Discussion Question: What is your favorite parable of Jesus, and why?

## The classification of the parables

Each parable has its own context, meaning, and purpose. But general similarities can be seen in the parables, enough to classify them into different categories.

One popular schema was outlined by Episcopal priest Robert Farrar Capon in his trilogy of books on the parables. He classified the parables into three broad categories:

1. **Parables of the Kingdom**
2. **Parables of Grace**
3. **Parables of Judgment**

Capon writes: “At the beginning of my study of Jesus’ parables I divided them into three groups: the **parables of the kingdom**, which run from the start of his ministry to the feeding of the five thousand; **the parables of grace**, which run from the feeding of the five thousand to Palm Sunday; and **the parables of judgment**, which are compressed for the most part into Holy Week. I want to add a note to that division now. If I were asked to assign a color to each of the three groups, I would call the parables of the kingdom green, the parables of grace purple, and the parables of judgment white. Consider.

The kingdom parables are **green** because so many of them are about growing—about seeds and plants. They are about the mystery of a kingdom already planted, a kingdom at hand, a kingdom in our midst— a kingdom, above all, that grows and prevails as a seed does: by its own sovereign power and not by any efforts of ours.

**Purple**, though, for the parables of grace. Purple, because they are about passionate, selfless love (the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son); but purple above all because they are about a love that works by death. “Greater love has no one than this,” Jesus said, “that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Death is the mainspring of the parables of grace.

The parables of judgment, however, are **white**. I said that they were hot, not cool; and of all the colors that can represent heat, white is the hottest. Red-hot passion scarcely rises above the level of sexual excitement; white-hot passion is love to the ultimate degree. More than that, white is the color of light; in John’s Gospel it is precisely the light of the world, Jesus himself, who brings on the judgment—who provokes the *krisis* of the world. Jesus says, “This is the judgment, that light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.”

But above all, the parables of judgment are white because, like white light, they contain all the colors of the other parables and will, if refracted through the prism of a sound interpretation, manifest them with perfect clarity.”

In this Supper and Study, we will look at select parables from each of these three categories. We begin with the **Parables of the Kingdom.**

Something to remember before we look at the parables:

**The parables are meant to invite listeners/readers into the Kingdom of God.**

The parables are not just memorable stories. They are key to Jesus’ teaching and proclamation. **They are key to entering and living within the Kingdom of God!**

The parables are meant to be life-changing! What the parables ultimately communicate is Jesus himself.

To wrestle with the meaning of the parables is a spiritual act, like prayer or receiving the sacraments. For those who are willing to enter the world of the parables and to follow their logic— that is, **for those who are willing to be changed by them**— the parables will reveal their profound wisdom. But for those who are not willing, who stay “outside”— the meaning of the parables will remain hidden.

With this in mind, let’s begin by looking at the first parable of Christ.

## The Parable of the Sower

*Matthew 13:1-9:* That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat there; and the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them.

Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched; and since they had no root they withered away.

Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.”

Jesus gives his own explanation of the parable:

“The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown; when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word which is sown in them.

And these in like manner are the ones sown upon rocky ground, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.

And others are the ones sown among thorns; they are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold” (Mark 4:13-20).

The first parable of Jesus... and the key to all the others!

“Jesus said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?” (*Mark 4:13*).

If we don't understand this parable, we won't understand the others.

This parable is about the Word of the Gospel and how we respond to it. It could be called a meta-parable: it is a parable about how all the parables are received (or not).

### **What does this parable teach us about the Kingdom of God?**

The Sower sows the seed indiscriminately, even recklessly

The Kingdom is for everyone

We must cultivate our heart (the ground) to receive the Word (the seed) and be fruitful

The effect of the sowing depends on the state of the soil

The sowing of the Word can be affected by external circumstances and inner dispositions

### **Paired Parables**

Several of the other Parables of the Kingdom come in twos: Jesus uses a pair of similar parables to illustrate the same concept.

### **The Parable of the Mustard Seed/The Leaven**

*Matthew 13:31-33*

#### **The Mustard Seed**

Another parable Jesus put before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

#### **The Leaven (Yeast)**

He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”

## **What do these parables teach us about the Kingdom of God?**

The Kingdom starts small but grows greatly

The Kingdom is hidden at first, but then becomes manifest

### **The Parable of The Hidden Treasure/The Pearl of Great Price**

*Matthew 13:44-46*

#### **The Hidden Treasure**

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

#### **The Pearl of Great Price**

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

#### **What is the dominant image of these parables?**

A person finds something extremely valuable then sells all he has and buys it

#### **What do these parables teach us about the Kingdom of God?**

Though the Kingdom of God can be hidden or hard to find, it is extremely valuable and is worth giving up everything else in order to obtain it

On discovering the Kingdom of God, one shouldn't give up—one should persist in trying to obtain it (cf. the effort of the man who buys the field or the pearl of great price)

Next Week: The Parables of Grace, Part One!

# THE PARABLES OF CHRIST

## A 5-Week Lenten Supper and Study (Spring 2026)

### Week 2:

#### The Parables of Grace, Part One

**Recap of Week 1:** Parables are illustrations or stories that use concrete details to communicate spiritual truths. Jesus used parables extensively in his teaching ministry, especially to reach those whose hearts would not be receptive to more straightforward teaching.

There are 30-35 parables of Christ, which can be grouped into three major groups: the **Parables of the Kingdom**, delivered near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the **Parables of Grace**, delivered on the way to Jerusalem, and the **Parables of Judgment**, delivered during Holy Week.

#### Parables of the Kingdom

- The Sower
- The Growing Seed
- The Mustard Seed
- The Hidden Treasure
- The Wheat and the Tares
- The Leaven
- The Pearl of Great Price
- The Dragnet

The early parables of Jesus are about the Kingdom of God: its nature, its growth in the human heart and in the world, its surpassing value, and how there will be a separation between those who live according to the Kingdom and those who don't.

### *Summary of the Parables of the Kingdom*

The Kingdom of God is God's presence in the world, which is beginning to turn all things away from death and toward life. The Kingdom is hidden but the most valuable thing in existence.

The message of the Kingdom is delivered indiscriminately to all, but not all receive it: some do not understand the message; some receive it joyfully but then fall away when hardship comes; some become unfruitful because of the anxieties of life and the desire for things other than the Kingdom. But for those who do receive the word about the Kingdom and let it bear fruit within them, they produce the fruit of good works and right living (*The Sower*). The word of the Kingdom grows in them in a hidden and mysterious way, day and night, they know not how (*The Growing Seed*).

The Kingdom starts small but grows to be mighty— this is true of the growth of the Kingdom in a person's heart but also true of its growth in the world (*The Mustard Seed/The Leaven*).

For those who discover the Kingdom, it is so valuable that it's worth parting with any earthly good to enter it and take possession of it (*The Hidden Treasure/The Pearl of Great Price*).

At the end of time, those who have lived according to the Kingdom and those who have rejected it will be separated: the former will be rewarded, and the latter will be punished (*The Wheat and the Tares/The Dragnet*).

## The Parables of Grace

The next category of Jesus' parables are the parables of grace. These were delivered in the middle part of Jesus' itinerant ministry, before his entry into Jerusalem.

These parables are about the great love of God toward sinners, how his grace is extended to us, and how forgiveness and new life is possible for those who accept it. Many of these parables show how much the Kingdom of God is not about "merit" or what one deserves or what is "fair." Some of the most beloved and well-known parables of Jesus belong to this category.

- The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)
- The Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-7)
- The Lost Coin (Luke 15:8–10)
- The Prodigal Son (or Lost Son) (Luke 15:11–32)
- The Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–9)
- The Importunate Widow (Luke 18:1-8)
- The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14)
- The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31)
- The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16)

Many of these parables are going to be familiar to you— you will know the plotline. Try to approach them as if you're hearing them for the first time. Try to hear the parable at each step of the story, without making assumptions about the meaning until you reach the end of the parable.

We'll begin with the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

## **The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)**

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered right; do this, and you will live.”

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed mercy on him.” And Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

### **Notes**

“had compassion” = literally, his organs were turned out (a visceral reaction)

The Samaritan’s action was non-reciprocal; he might not even see the man again

The Samaritan was the least likely to help the man but the one who actually did

## *The Original Interpretation*

Samaritanism: An offshoot of Judaism which holds that Mount Gerizim, and not the Temple in Jerusalem, was the place chosen by God to dwell

Samaritans were of “mixed blood”: they had both Jewish and pagan ancestry

The Jews and Samaritans were hostile to each other; “For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (John 4:9)

Samaritans are mentioned several times in the NT, always in a negative light when Jews are referring to them

The priest, the Levite: honored members of society, two members of the chosen people who should lend a hand to their fellow Jew

A scribe correctly summarizes the Law as being a matter of loving God and loving neighbor. The scribe feels that he has done this, but wants to know who counts as his “neighbor”: Is it only his fellow Jews, or is it wider than that?

The parable demonstrates that the Samaritan who came upon the half-dead man did not ask whether he was “required” to love him. He became the man’s neighbor out of compassion.

The parable’s main point is that *all* people, not just our fellows and not just those we love or like, are our neighbors. And therefore, we are required to love all people and to show mercy on all. The Lord extends this teaching even to the love of enemies in his Sermon on the Mount— a principle he demonstrates in his own life by dying on the cross for, and forgiving, those who crucified him.

So the answer to the scribe’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” may be deduced from the parable: “Anyone who needs help.”

**Why is Jesus’ identification with a Samaritan surprising?**

**What does this parable teach us?**

**How might Jesus tell this parable today to fit our context?**

### *The Allegorical Interpretation*

This interpretation is found in several of the Church Fathers, with details differing

**The man who fell to thieves:** Humanity fallen to sin

**The thieves:** the demons, the passions

**The man's wounds:** the wounds left by his sins

**The Priest and the Levite:** The Old Covenant, which is unable to save us

**The Good Samaritan:** Christ

**Oil:** the holy chrism used in Baptism and Chrismation/Confirmation; also, the teachings of the Gospel which comfort the soul

**Wine:** the wine used in Holy Communion; also, the harder teachings of the Gospel which may sting but are necessary for our healing

**The Donkey:** Jesus' own body, which bears sinners back to God

**The Inn:** The Church

**The Innkeeper:** The Bishops and Pastors of the Church

**The Two Coins:** Scripture and Tradition

**The charge to take care of the man:** Jesus' charge to the pastors to take care of his people until his return

**The Good Samaritan's return:** Jesus' return, when he will repay those who have labored in ministry

## **The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin**

A trilogy of parables: The Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Lost Son (Prodigal Son)

### *The Lost Sheep*

Luke 15:1-7

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

The imagery of God as a shepherd has a long history in the OT:

- Psalm 23 (The Lord is my shepherd)
- Psalm 78 (God the shepherd of Israel)
- Ezekiel 34 (the unfaithful shepherds of Israel)
- Proverbs 27 (the shepherd defends his flock from wild beasts)
- 2 Samuel 12 (the shepherd loves his sheep even as a daughter)

The priests and kings of Israel are supposed to be shepherds, but when they fail to seek out the lost sheep and care for the sheep entrusted to them, God Himself takes up the role of shepherd (see Ezekiel 34).

And Jesus uses shepherding language of himself, most notably in the Good Shepherd discourse in John 10

### **What does a lost sheep signify?**

A person who has moved away from God, lost their faith, strayed

It is a precarious situation, much like a sheep lost in harsh terrain

### **What does this parable teach us about God? About ourselves?**

## *The Lost Coin*

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

One of only four parables of Christ in which a woman figures prominently (The Leaven, the Lost Coin, the Importunate Widow, the Ten Virgins)

And the only parable where God is represented as a woman

The drachma, rendered here by *silver coin*, was about a day’s wage for a laborer

Same basic meaning as the Parable of the Lost Sheep: God’s searching out lost sinners and his rejoicing over their return

Coins are images of the king; human beings are images of the King of the Universe

Humans are represented as images/coins throughout the patristic tradition: the Fall marred the Image, and the Incarnation restored the Image

An interesting symbolic interpretation:

The nine coins are the nine angelic orders and the one coin that was lost is humankind

(Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, Angels) [this angelic hierarchy is drawn from the letters of St. Paul and the writings of St. Dionysius the Areopagite]

**How do these two parables relate to the complaint of the Pharisees?**

**What do these parables teach us?**

“We’re all important to God”

God is active in searching out the lost

When someone returns to the fold, we should rejoice

## **The Lost Son (Prodigal Son) (Luke 15:11–32)**

The most well-known and beloved of Jesus' parables; Charles Dickens said it was the best short story of all time

And Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father.

But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found.'"

## A Story in Five Movements

1. The younger son asks for his inheritance while his father is still living.
2. He travels to a far country and wastes his wealth on extravagant pleasures.
3. After a famine leaves him destitute, he “comes to himself” and makes the decision to return to his father.
4. The father sees his prodigal son, runs to and embraces him, and reinstates him in the family, to great fanfare.
5. The elder son is upset, and the father pleads with him to rejoice and not to be bitter.

### *The house of the father*

Communion with God; it is a place of security and love, but not of reckless commitment to satisfying the passions

### *The request to receive the inheritance*

Sinners asking God to enjoy his gifts but not in communion with Him

### *The far country*

A place where sinners are free to spend their time and energy on their sinful passions; somewhere far away, seemingly outside the observation of the father

The “far country” is a concept well known to those who have addictions or a rebellious season in life

### *The meaning of prodigal*

George Carlin: “I’m tired of hearing *prodigal* being used to mean wandering, given to running away, or leaving and returning.

The parable in Luke tells of a man who squanders his father's money. **Prodigal means recklessly wasteful or extravagant.** And if you say that popular usage has changed that, I say f\*\*\* popular usage.”

### *The famine*

When a life of prodigality and dissipation leads us unfulfilled and hungry

*“Came to himself”*

The moment a person realizes that their prodigality in the far country has left them destitute

A moment of clarity, a realization of one’s wretched state

The beginning of repentance and the movement back toward the Father

*The father scanning the horizon*

God awaiting the return of his wayward children

*The father runs and embraces the prodigal son*

God’s embrace of repentant sinners

The only time in Scripture God is depicted as running

*The robe and sandals, the ring, the fatted calf and the festive meal*

The robe: the garment of Baptism

The sandals: “feet shod to share the Gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6:15)

The ring: the seal which identifies the son as a member of that family, i.e. the anointing in Baptism and Chrismation (“you are sealed by the Holy Spirit”)

The fatted calf who is killed: Christ, who is slain for sinners and given to them to be eaten “with faith and thanksgiving”

The feast: the Eucharist

*The response of the Elder Son*

The bitterness of “righteous” persons when notorious sinners repent and are restored to fellowship with God

Capon writes: “The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) is **practically a festival of death**: the father dies at the beginning of the parable by putting his will into effect; the prodigal dies in the far country when his life as he knew it comes to an end in bitter poverty; the prodigal dies again— fruitfully, this time— when he comes home, confesses that he is a dead son... finally, the fatted calf dies to make possible the party that is the point of the whole parable.”

**What does this parable teach us about God? About sin? About repentance?  
What does the response of the Elder Son teach us?**

## **THE PARABLES OF CHRIST**

### **A 5-Week Lenten Supper and Study (Spring 2026)**

#### **Week 3:**

#### **The Parables of Grace, Part Two**

**Recap of Weeks 1-2:** Parables are illustrations or stories that use concrete details to communicate spiritual truths. Jesus used parables extensively in his teaching ministry, especially to reach those whose hearts would not be receptive to more straightforward teaching.

There are 30-35 parables of Christ, which can be grouped into three major groups: the Parables of the Kingdom, delivered near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the Parables of Grace, delivered on the way to Jerusalem, and the Parables of Judgment, delivered during Holy Week.

The Parables of the Kingdom describe the nature, value, and growth of the Kingdom of God, and how it is accepted (or not). The Parables of the Grace vividly portray God's love for sinners.

#### *A Parable on Wealth*

#### **The Unjust Steward (or Dishonest Manager) (Luke 16:1–15)**

Many consider this the most difficult parable of Christ to interpret. There are many interpretations, both ancient and modern.

Jesus delivers this parable immediately after the Parable of the Prodigal Son in St. Luke's Gospel.

Jesus also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a steward, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.’ And the steward said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness; for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations.

“He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they scoffed at him. But he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts; for what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

“The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone enters it violently.”

### **Why is this a difficult parable to understand and interpret?**

The steward is deceitful and yet Jesus is praising him

The parable is about scheming

Before we apply the parable spiritually, we must understand the story on a literal level.

### **There was a rich man**

Very wealthy, apparently wealthy enough that people owe him huge amounts (100 vats of oil is 900-1000 gallons, 100 kors of wheat is also a huge amount)

### **Who had a steward**

The steward is not a slave but a freeman who manages the rich man's wealth; he is a financial manager who oversees the minutiae of the man's transactions; the steward would have control over the man's accounts and access to his money

### **Charges were brought to him that the steward was wasting the rich man's goods**

The steward was accused of wasting his employer's wealth— perhaps he was withdrawing money for himself and using it to obtain a lavish lifestyle

**And the master called the steward and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.'**

Whether the accusation was true or not, the steward is fired and is told to present a final account of the man's financial position

**And the steward said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship.'**

The steward knows he is going to be out of a job, but he doesn't know what else he's going to do— he's not strong enough for manual labor and too ashamed to beg. So he comes up with a plan to ensure he'll be secure after his firing.

**So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'**

The steward meets with the master's debtors and helps them out by reducing the amount they owe. Since these are huge debts, a 50% or even 20% reduction in the debt would be a huge help. So the steward cheats the master out of the full amount of what he's owed but carries favor with these debtors. After the steward is fired, the thankful debtors will offer him a place to stay or perhaps hire him.

**The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness; for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.**

Perhaps surprisingly, rather than being angry with the steward for cheating him (again), the master praises the steward because he acted shrewdly in setting himself up for success. The master respects that he thought quickly and acted shrewdly.

So is Jesus commending dishonesty?

Remember: Each parable usually has one main point. And when the Lord makes a comparison, it's often just in one way. For example, Jesus says he will come like a thief in the night—the main comparison is that he will come unexpectedly like a thief, not that he is like a thief in other ways (greedy, violent, on the run from the law, etc.).

So it's unlikely Jesus is commending dishonesty generally. But he is commending the steward in some way.

**So what is the main point of this parable, on the literal level?**

Don't be passive. Do something about your situation.

Provide for your future.

“In praise of shrewdness”

Biblical examples of people acting shrewdly: Rahab helping out the spies, Tamar fooling Judah, Nicodemus preparing for a regime change

The main thrust of the parable: Act now to prepare for your future. Be concerned about your future and provide for it. It is commendable to prepare for your future rather than just having no plan and making no preparations at all.

If we take this literal meaning and apply it on the spiritual plane, what is the meaning?

Act now to prepare for your eternal future. Be concerned with your eternal fate and how you will fare when you depart this life. It is commendable to act now to provide yourself a future in the Kingdom of God rather than living aimlessly and not preparing yourself for the End.

Jesus notes that the children of this generation are shrewder than the children of light. That is, they are more attentive to worldly matters and finances than spiritual people. But if they are attentive to something as relatively unimportant as wealth, how can we not be attentive to something as all-important as our place in the Kingdom of God?

“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal habitations.”

If we give alms to the poor and help others in this life (like the steward helped the debtors), then when we are “fired” (when we die) the people we have helped will be our intercessors on the Day of Judgment. They will receive us into the eternal habitations. So we make friends through unrighteous wealth by using our money to help others, so that they will remember our kindness and put in a good word for us.

We help them now so that they may help us later (like in the parable). We are preparing for our eternal future.

But if we view wealth in this way, it cannot be an ultimate good in and of itself (“you cannot serve God and mammon”) but only an instrument through which we accomplish the works of God.

*Another note on this parable:*

This parable is connected to the parable that follows it (the Rich Man and Lazarus) in that it is also concerned with using wealth to help others. Though in that parable, the rich man does *not* help someone else, he doesn't provide for his future or make friends using his wealth, and so his fate in the afterlife is dire.

### *Parables on Prayer*

#### **The Importunate Widow (Luke 18:1-8)**

And Jesus told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor regarded man; and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Vindicate me against my adversary.' For a while he refused; but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming.'"

And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Widows: some of the poorest and least powerful members of society

A widow has been cheated by someone and has brought a suit against him

She pleads with the judge to rule in her favor, but doing so will not benefit him financially (as opposed to ruling in favor of someone rich, who could pay him for such a decision)

But she wears him down through her importunity (persistence, nagging)

**What is the main point of this parable?**

Don't give up! Keep asking in prayer!

**How is God compared with the unrighteous judge?**

God is the righteous judge, so if even an unrighteous judge can be pestered into doing the right thing, how much more will God provide for what is right.

## **The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14)**

Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

### **How would the cultural attitudes toward Pharisees and tax collectors in Jesus’ time influence the reception of this parable?**

Elements of the Pharisee’s prayer:

- “Prayed to himself” more than to God
- Thanking God for his own virtue
- Mentioning his good deeds
- Condemning someone else

Elements of the Publican’s prayer

- Stands far off
- Will not lift his eyes
- Beats his breast
- Acknowledges his sinfulness and asks forgiveness

### **How are the Pharisee and the Publican contrasted?**

One is prideful and self-commending, while the other is humble and self-condemning

### **What do these two parables teach us about prayer?**

The importance of PERSISTENCE and HUMILITY

**Next Week:** The Parables of Judgment, Part One (The Rich Man and Lazarus, The Wedding Feast, the Talents)

# **THE PARABLES OF CHRIST**

## **A 5-Week Lenten Supper and Study (Spring 2026)**

### **Week 4:**

#### **The Parables of Judgment, Part One**

**Recap of Weeks 1-3:** Parables are illustrations or stories that use concrete details to communicate spiritual truths. Jesus used parables extensively in his teaching ministry, especially to reach those whose hearts would not be receptive to more straightforward teaching.

There are 30-35 parables of Christ, which can be grouped into three major groups: the Parables of the Kingdom, delivered near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the Parables of Grace, delivered on the way to Jerusalem, and the Parables of Judgment, delivered mostly during Holy Week.

The Parables of the Kingdom describe the nature, value, and growth of the Kingdom of God, and how it is accepted (or not). The Parables of the Grace vividly portray God's love for sinners.

#### **The Parables of Judgment**

Delivered for the most part during Holy Week

These parables are about what happens when God's grace is rejected or neglected

The darkest parables and the most polemical (against the rich, the religious elite, the unrepentant)

- The Rich Man and Lazarus
- The Rich Fool
- The Barren Fig Tree
- The Wicked Tenants
- The Wedding Feast (or Great Banquet)
- The Talents/Minas
- The Unforgiving Servant
- The Wise and Foolish Virgins
- The Sheep and the Goats

Robert Capon:

“If I have anything to contribute to the interpretation of the parables of judgment, it is my steadfast refusal to separate them from the rest of Jesus’ parables. I find in them, again and again, not only the green, growing, mysterious, catholic kingdom but also the purple, passionate grace that saves by death. Therefore I am convinced that anyone who interprets them as if Jesus had decided simply to abandon his previous palette— who takes the view, in other words, that Jesus had gotten over his penchant for painting kindly kingdoms and gracious loves and was now getting down to depicting the grim “final solution” in which God gets even with sinners by marching them into the gas chambers of an eternal Dachau— is making a crashing mistake.

The Gospel of grace must not be turned into a bait-and-switch offer... Jesus must not be read as having baited us with grace only to clobber us in the end with law. For as the death and resurrection of Jesus were accomplished once and for all, so the grace that reigns by those mysteries reigns eternally— even in the thick of judgment.

Accordingly, let me give you what I consider to be the master key to the parables of judgment. As **growth-in-a-mystery** was the governing device in the parables of the kingdom, and as **death-resurrection** was the governing device of the parables of grace, so **inclusion before exclusion** is the chief interpretative principle of the parables of judgment. As a general rule— and especially in his specific parables of judgment— Jesus is at pains to show that no one is kicked out who wasn’t already in. . . .

I propose to show that judgment, as it is portrayed in the parables of Jesus (not to mention the rest of the New Testament), never comes until after acceptance: grace remains forever the sovereign consideration. The difference between the blessed and the cursed is one thing and one thing only: the blessed accept their acceptance and the cursed reject it; but the acceptance is already in place for both groups before either does anything about it. To put it another way, heaven is populated by nothing but forgiven sinners and hell is populated by nothing but forgiven sinners: the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the *kosmos*, not just of the chosen few (John 1:29); Jesus said, “I, if I be lifted up, will draw all to me” (John 12:32).

The parables of judgment are therefore not the Lord's way of doing an "about-face" and undoing all his previous teaching about divine mercy. "His property is always to have mercy..."

It's also important to remember that the parables are not just memorable stories: they are divine descriptions of *the way the world is*.

The parables illustrate the depths of the human heart—both our faith and possibility for good **and** our recalcitrance and possibility of rejecting God. So the parables of judgment are not simply illustrations of how God judges, **but icons of how the human heart can close itself off to God**. The parables of judgment are narratives that illustrate the contours of the human heart.

### **The Rich Man and Lazarus (*Luke 16:19-31*)**

<sup>19</sup> "There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. <sup>20</sup> And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, <sup>21</sup> who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. <sup>22</sup> The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried; <sup>23</sup> and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom. <sup>24</sup> And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.' <sup>25</sup> But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. <sup>26</sup> And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' <sup>27</sup> And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house, <sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' <sup>29</sup> But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' <sup>30</sup> And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' <sup>31</sup> He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.'"

### *Elements of the parable*

God is not present in this parable directly but Abraham acts as a mediator/representative

Lazarus (Eleazar: means “God will help”)

Eschatological reversal: the rich man was in comfort in this life but then in agony in the afterlife, while the poor man Lazarus suffered in this life but then was comforted in the afterlife

The punishment for neglecting others, being heartless

The rich man must have known Lazarus was at his gates and in such a sorry condition because he calls him *by name*— he knew him

But even in the afterlife the Rich Man doesn’t address Lazarus but only Abraham

And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.’”

Faith is a matter of the heart; if one does not respond to the Scriptures or the needs of one’s neighbor, one will not respond even if they witness a miracle like resurrection

This last comment by Abraham points to the reality which became apparent after the Resurrection of Christ: many of his people did not believe in him, even after his resurrection

And this is apparent even earlier if we consider a different Lazarus: Lazarus of Bethany, who Jesus raised from the dead. And after this resurrection, the authorities not only did not believe in Jesus, but they began to plot his murder (John 11:53).

Jesus as a Lazarus figure: he too is “a worm and no man” (Psalm 22), covered in sores (wounds), despised and dying outside the gates (i.e. on Golgotha)—“he suffered outside the city walls” (Hebrews 13:12). And like the Lazarus of the parable, Jesus will also be vindicated and consoled, but in his resurrection.

## The Wedding Feast (or Great Banquet)

*Matthew 22:1-14*

And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, <sup>2</sup> "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son, <sup>3</sup> and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the marriage feast; but they would not come. <sup>4</sup> Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, Behold, I have made ready my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves are killed, and everything is ready; come to the marriage feast.' <sup>5</sup> But they made light of it and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, <sup>6</sup> while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. <sup>7</sup> The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. <sup>8</sup> Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. <sup>9</sup> Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find.' <sup>10</sup> And those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

<sup>11</sup> "But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; <sup>12</sup> and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. <sup>13</sup> Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.' <sup>14</sup> For many are called, but few are chosen."

One interpretation:

A parable about the response of Israel to the Messiah and then the opportunity for Gentiles to become a part of God's family

King: God

King's Son: Christ

The marriage feast: The victory of Christ in his paschal mystery (cf. the Wedding Supper of the Lamb in Revelation)

Those invited: Israel

The shameful treatment of the king's servants: Israel's rejection of the prophets and apostles

The invitation to others: The invitation to Gentiles after Israel's rejection of the Messiah

This parable can be fruitfully read alongside St. Paul's teaching about Israel and the nations in Romans 9-11

The wedding garment: The righteousness of Christ? Faith? Good works? Faith and good works?

The man with improper attire = someone who lacks faith, good works, but also someone who lacks *reverence*. Someone who thinks they don't have to play by the rules, that they can be saved *on their terms*.

This is a parable about not pushing boundaries or testing the limits of God's mercy.

A parallel parable in Luke 14:15-24:

One of those at table said to Jesus, "Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!" But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many; and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for all is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it; I pray you, have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them; I pray you, have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' So the servant came and reported this to his master. Then the householder in anger said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'"

### **Takeaways?**

"All are invited, but you gotta accept."

"If God invites you to a feast, you should show up."

## The Talents

*Matthew 25:14-30*

<sup>14</sup> "For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; <sup>15</sup> to one he gave five talents to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. <sup>16</sup> He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more. <sup>17</sup> So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. <sup>18</sup> But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. <sup>19</sup> Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup> And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.' <sup>21</sup> His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.' <sup>22</sup> And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.' <sup>23</sup> His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.' <sup>24</sup> He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; <sup>25</sup> so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' <sup>26</sup> But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? <sup>27</sup> Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. <sup>28</sup> So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents. <sup>29</sup> For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. <sup>30</sup> And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.'

A talent is 6,000 denarii (over 15 years' wages)

A parable about working for the Lord with the gifts we are given and how he expects us to be diligent until his return

Everyone who has, to him more will be entrusted, but he who is not faithful with a little will not be entrusted with more (cf. the saints)

The talents in the parable could be interpreted as sharing in love and service, rather than one's gifts or abilities

The first two are active and put in effort but the third is passive and does the least amount of work possible.

Yet it's also a matter of faith vs. fear: the first two take risks and invest the money, but the last is so afraid of the Master that he doesn't end up doing much of anything

A servile fear of God stifles true ministry

**Next Week:** The Parables of Judgment, Part II (The Unforgiving Servant, The Ten Bridesmaids) and Conclusion

# THE PARABLES OF CHRIST

## A 5-Week Lenten Supper and Study (Spring 2026)

### Week 5:

#### The Parables of Judgment (Part Two) and Conclusion

**Recap of Weeks 1-4:** Parables are illustrations or stories that use concrete details to communicate spiritual truths. Jesus used parables extensively in his teaching ministry, especially to reach those whose hearts would not be receptive to more straightforward teaching.

There are 30-35 parables of Christ, which can be grouped into three major groups: the **Parables of the Kingdom**, delivered near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the **Parables of Grace**, delivered on the way to Jerusalem, and the **Parables of Judgment**, delivered mostly during Holy Week.

The Parables of the Kingdom describe the nature, value, and growth of the Kingdom of God, and how it is accepted (or not). The Parables of Grace vividly portray God's love for sinners. The Parables of Judgment depict what happens when God's grace is rejected or neglected.

#### The Parables of Judgment

Delivered for the most part during Holy Week

These parables are about what happens when God's grace is rejected or neglected

The darkest parables and the most polemical (against the rich, the religious elite, the unrepentant)

- The Rich Man and Lazarus
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## The Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-35)

Jesus said, “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt.

When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

Ten thousand talents: one talent is 15 years labor, so ten thousand talents is a ludicrously large amount, a bigger debt than anyone could possibly pay back

The King = God

The King’s servants = human beings

The servant’s debt to the King = our sins against God

The forgiveness of the debt = God’s forgiveness

The other servant’s debt to the servant = another person’s sins against us

The refusal of the unforgiving servant to forgive = our refusal to forgive others

The unforgiving servant thrown in prison = divine punishment for those who persist in unforgiveness

## **What is the main point of this parable?**

We must forgive as we have been forgiven.

Don't forget how much God has forgiven us.

### **The Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matt 25:1-13)**

Jesus said, "Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those maidens rose and trimmed their lamps.

And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to the merchants and buy for yourselves.' And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterward the other maidens came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

This parable is called the Parable of the Ten Virgins, Ten Bridesmaids, Ten Maidens, or Wise and Foolish Virgins

The first in the final trilogy of parables before Maundy Thursday (Ten Virgins, The Talents, The Sheep and the Goats)

One of the final parables of Jesus, delivered on Holy Tuesday, just three days before his death

### *Semitic wedding customs at the time of Jesus*

On the night of the wedding, the bride would be in her home, dressed in her bridal gown and veil, accompanied by her family and friends. They are awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom, who will arrive to escort the bride to his parents' home for the wedding ceremony and feast to take place.

When the groom arrives, it is announced by a messenger. The friends of the bride (the bridesmaids) will carry lamps in the nighttime procession from the house of the bride to the house of the groom's parents. These are clay lamps with a wicker and fueled by olive oil.

Ten maidens = in the Greek, *parthenoi*, which could mean virgins, young women, or maidens. These are young women who have not yet married, not older women who chose not to marry

The oil used to light the lamps was olive oil

Oil had many uses in the ancient world and thus was a rich symbol:

- Anointing of kings and priests
- Medicine (anointing wounds)
- Food (eaten on its own and used for cooking)
- Athletics (athletes and Olympians would oil their bodies to limber up)

Oil is also used in the Christian tradition, in Baptism, Chrismation/Confirmation, Unction, and Ordination

There is a linguistic connection in Greek between oil (*elaion*) and mercy (*eleos*); the phrase "Lord have mercy" (Kyrie eleison) could be understood "Lord anoint us [for comfort, strength, health, etc.]"

The main point of the parable: The Bridegroom was delayed; some of the maidens were prepared for his arrival, and some were not.

Practical application: We need to be prepared for the return of Christ, expressed in how we live.

### *Allegorical details*

The Bridegroom = Christ

The arrival of the Bridegroom = the return of Christ

Maidens = those awaiting the return of Christ

The delay of the Bridegroom = that Christ does not return within most people's lifetimes

The falling asleep of the maidens = when a person dies before the return of Christ

The cry at midnight = the angelic announcement of Christ's return

The waking up of the maidens after the announcement = the resurrection

The oil = The Holy Spirit, faith, good works, mercy, a virtuous life (or some combination thereof)

The wise maidens = those who lived with faith and mercy

The foolish maidens = those who did not live with faith and mercy

The effort of the foolish maidens to find more oil = the effort to find faith and mercy after neglecting it for a lifetime, an effort which is futile

The marriage feast = the Supper of the Lamb, when the Lord will be united with his people

The word of the Bridegroom to the foolish maidens = the acknowledgment that Christ did not know them in this life

**Why is it that the wise maidens were unable or unwilling to share their oil with the foolish maidens?**

If the oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, faith, or works, these cannot be transferred from one person to another: a person either had these things in life or they didn't.

## *The Parables of Judgment*

### **How does Capon's motif of "inclusion before exclusion" apply to these parables?**

Those who are judged are included at the beginning of the parable.

Grace is always given, but you must do something with it.

### **How does divine judgment seem to function in these parables?**

Judgment follows when grace is rejected or neglected. To whom much is given, much is expected.

When exclusion occurs, it is the fault of the person, not God.

### **Lessons from the Parables of Judgment**

- We must act before it's too late.
- We must be prepared.
- Those who do not prepare will be blindsided when the Lord returns.
- "Don't count on tomorrow."
- People through their habits can make themselves more or less receptive to grace.

### **When Jesus told these parables, did the people understand what he was saying?**

Probably not. Three days later they killed him.

### **How does the Lord's Passion and Death (which would be accomplished mere days after these parables) influence how we interpret the Parables of Judgment?**

The parables of judgment must be seen in light of God's love for sinners as revealed in the Crucified Christ. Grace is offered to all, but it can be rejected or ignored. This does not, however, change the immutable and steadfast nature of the divine love.

## Conclusion:

### General observations on the Parables of Christ

#### 1. They use earthy and ordinary realities to communicate spiritual realities.

“Christ, as though on purpose, chooses from this world the most mundane things to reveal to people the mystery of eternal life. After all, what can be more mundane than salt, leaven, a mustard seed, the sun, birds, grass, and the lilies of the field, the wheat and the tares...?” – St. Nikolai Velimirovich

A cursory look at the parables shows the ordinary subject matter Christ chooses to illustrate divine mysteries. Sometimes he uses earthly matter or animals:

- Seed
- Soil
- Wheat
- Fish
- Lamp
- Sheep
- Goats
- Coins

Other times Christ uses common relationships: father and son, master and slave, creditor and debtor, king and subjects, brothers, friends.

These ordinary materials and relationships are used to convey divine realities like forgiveness, grace, mercy, punishment, perseverance in prayer, wisdom or foolishness, and the growth of the Kingdom of God.

#### 2. They are often agricultural in their imagery.

Especially in the early parables, the imagery is agricultural and has to do with growth: seeds, soil, shrubs, fig trees, planting. Some of the parables take images from the city, but mostly the images are from rural life, as is fitting for someone from a small town in Galilee.

#### 3. Many are highly memorable stories and have entered the pantheon of classic narratives in world culture.

Even among those who know little of the Bible, the parables of Jesus remain some of the best-known stories in the world. Many well-known phrases come from Jesus' parables, including “prodigal son,” “Good Samaritan,” “lost sheep,” “leave the ninety-nine” “the eleventh hour,” “an enemy hath done this,” “lamp under a bushel,” et al.

#### **4. Context is (sometimes) key!**

Sometimes Jesus begins teaching in parables with seemingly nothing that spurred it on— that is, with little narrative context. But often the immediate context of the parable gives us a clue to the meaning of the parable and why Jesus was delivering it at that time.

For example, the trilogy of parables on the lost in Luke 15 (the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son) is directly occasioned by the complaint of the Pharisees that Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. The parable of the great banquet (Luke 14) is inspired by a scribe's exclamation that it will be blessed to eat in the Kingdom of God.

When we look at the context of each parable, as well as the order the parables are presented in the text, we have a better chance of understanding them.

**5. They often have a twist ending or unexpected turning point; one cannot assume one knows the meaning of the parable until it's finished.**

**6. They contain surprising details that may seem at odds with other points of Jesus' teaching or customary morality.**

Examples include the dishonesty of the unjust steward, the "foolishness" of the father of the prodigal son, the Five Bridesmaids' unwillingness to share their oil with the other five, and that to those who have, more will be given.

**7. They are meant to invite listeners/readers into the Kingdom which Jesus announces and of which he is the center.**

The Parables are not just memorable stories. They are key to Jesus' teaching and proclamation; **they are key to entering and living within the Kingdom of God!**

To wrestle with the meaning of the parables is a spiritual act, like prayer or receiving the sacraments. For those who are willing to enter the world of the parables and to follow their logic— that is, **for those who are willing to be changed by them**— the parables will reveal their profound wisdom. But for those who are not willing, who stay "outside"— the meaning of the parables will remain hidden.

The parables are meant to be life-changing! What the parables ultimately communicate is **Jesus himself**.

May these Parables of Our Lord Jesus Christ be always engraved in our hearts!

May they enter into our souls and change the way we see the world, ourselves, and God— and ultimately, change the way we live. Amen!

### **Further Reading**

*The Parables of Jesus* by Joachim Jeremias

*Jesus of Nazareth* by Pope Benedict XVI

*The Parables of the Kingdom, The Parables of Grace, and The Parables of Judgment* by Robert Farrar Capon [later collected as *Kingdom, Grace, and Judgment*]

*Jesus Christ: His Life and Teaching, Vol. 4 - The Parables of Jesus* by Hilarion Alfeyev

*Poet and Peasant* by Kenneth E. Bailey

*The Parables of Jesus* by Simon J. Kistemaker

## Appendix A: Thirty-Three Parables of Christ

Number	Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke
1	The Strong Man	Matthew 12:29	Mark 3:27	Luke 11:21–22
2	The Two Debtors			Luke 7:41–43
3	<b>The Sower</b>	Matthew 13:3–9	Mark 4:3–9	Luke 8:5–8
4	The Lamp Under a Bushel	Matthew 5:14–15	Mark 4:21–25	Luke 8:16–18
5	The Growing Seed		Mark 4:26–29	
6	The Wheat and the Tares	Matthew 13:24–30		
7	<b>The Good Samaritan</b>			Luke 10:25–37
8	The Friend at Midnight			Luke 11:5–8
9	The Rich Fool			Luke 12:16–21
10	The Barren Fig Tree			Luke 13:6–9
11	<b>The Mustard Seed</b>	Matthew 13:31–32	Mark 4:30–32	Luke 13:18–19
12	<b>The Leaven</b>	Matthew 13:33		Luke 13:20–21
13	<b>The Hidden Treasure</b>	Matthew 13:44		

Number	Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke
14	<b>The Pearl of Great Price</b>	Matthew 13:45–46		
15	The Dragnet	Matthew 13:47–50		
16	The Wedding Feast			Luke 14:7–14
17	The Tower Builder and the King Preparing for War			Luke 14:28-33
18	<b>The Lost Sheep</b>	Matthew 18:10–14		Luke 15:4–6
19	<b>The Unforgiving Servant</b>	Matthew 18:23–35		
20	<b>The Lost Coin</b>			Luke 15:8–9
21	<b>The Prodigal Son</b>			Luke 15:11–32
22	<b>The Unjust Steward</b>			Luke 16:1–13
23	<b>The Rich Man and Lazarus</b>			Luke 16:19–31
24	<b>The Importunate Widow</b>			Luke 18:1–8
25	<b>The Pharisee and the Publican</b>			Luke 18:9–14
26	The Workers in the Vineyard	Matthew 20:1–16		

Number	Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke
27	The Two Sons	Matthew 21:28–32		
28	The Wicked Tenants	Matthew 21:33–41	Mark 12:1–9	Luke 20:9–16
29	<b>The Great Banquet</b>	Matthew 22:1–14		Luke 14:15–24
30	The Budding Fig Tree	Matthew 24:32–35	Mark 13:28–31	Luke 21:29–33
31	The Faithful or Unfaithful Servant	Matthew 24:42–51	Mark 13:34–37	Luke 12:35–48
32	<b>The Ten Virgins</b>	Matthew 25:1–13		
33	<b>The Talents or Minas</b>	Matthew 25:14–30		Luke 19:12–27

## APPENDIX B

### Common themes of the Parables of Christ

**The growth of the Kingdom of God from small beginnings:** The Mustard Seed, The Leaven

**The surpassing value of the Kingdom of God:** The Treasure in the Field, The Pearl of Great Price

**Persistence in prayer:** The Friend at Midnight, The Importunate Widow

**Loss and redemption:** Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost (Prodigal) Son

**Vigilance:** The Faithful or Unfaithful Slave, The Ten Bridegrooms

**Forgiveness:** The Unforgiving Servant, The Two Debtors, The Prodigal Son

**Judgment Day:** The Barren Fig Tree, the Wheat and the Tares, the Dragnet, The Ten Bridegrooms

**Compassion:** The Good Samaritan, The Prodigal Son

**The illusory value of wealth:** The Rich Fool, Lazarus and Dives, The Dishonest Steward

**The opportunity to enter the Kingdom even after disobedience:** The Laborers in the Vineyard, The Two Sons, The Prodigal Son

## Appendix C

### The “Main Point” of Each Parable, in a sentence

#### *The Sower*

The message of the Gospel is offered to all, but the state of a person’s heart will determine if that message will be understood, accepted, and preserved.

#### *The Growing Seed*

God’s work in a person’s heart (and in the world) is mysterious and gradual, growing in ways beyond our intent and attention.

#### *The Lamp under a Bushel*

When God gives gifts or knowledge to a person, they are not meant to hide it but to share it for the good of others.

#### *The Mustard Seed/The Leaven*

The Kingdom of God has small beginnings, but it grows greatly.

#### *The Budding Fig Tree*

Believers should be aware of the signs of the times and prepare for the end accordingly.

#### *The Strong Man Bound*

Human beings are under the power of the Evil One, but the Son of God can vanquish him and free them.

#### *The Hidden Treasure/The Pearl of Great Price*

The Kingdom of God is hidden, but it is so valuable that once you find it, you should be willing to give up everything to obtain it.

#### *The Wheat and the Weeds/The Dragnet*

Both the righteous and the wicked co-exist in this world, but at the end of time they will be separated and assigned to reward and punishment, respectively.

## The Parables of Grace

### *The Two Debtors*

He who is forgiven much, loves much, but he who is forgiven little, loves little.

### *The Good Samaritan*

My neighbor is anyone who needs my help.

### *The Friend at Midnight/The Importunate Widow*

Be persistent in your prayer and never lose heart.

### *The Lost Sheep/The Lost Coin*

God seeks out those who have strayed and rejoices when they are found and brought back.

### *The Prodigal Son (or Lost Son)*

No matter how wastefully we've lived, if we return to the Father, he will welcome us back with joy.

### *The Faithful or Unfaithful Slave*

We must not become lazy or careless in life just because the return of the Lord seems so far away.

### *The Honored Seat*

He who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.

### *The Tower Builder and the King Preparing for War*

A person should really consider the cost of being a disciple of Jesus before they make the determination to follow him.

### *The Unjust Steward*

It is wise to prepare for one's eternal future in this life.

### *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*

Humility, not spiritual achievement, makes for an acceptable prayer.

*The Rich Man and Lazarus*

If we do not respond to the needs of others, we will not respond to miracles.

*The Two Sons*

It is better to delay in doing the work of God than to say you will do it and not do it.

*The Laborers in the Vineyard*

No matter when a person repents and goes to work for the Lord— in childhood, adolescence, adulthood, or old age— they will be rewarded with eternal life.

**The Parables of Judgment**

*The Rich Fool*

Do not put your hopes in material wealth, because you do not know when you will die, and wealth will not be of use to you then.

*The Barren Fig Tree*

God gives people time and opportunity to repent, but this window is not never-ending in this life.

*The Wicked Tenants/The Wedding Feast (or Great Banquet)*

If a people does not respond to God's invitation, the opportunity will be given to another people.

*The Talents/Minas*

We must get to work with the gifts that God has given us, rather than being slothful.

*The Unforgiving Servant*

We must forgive others like God has forgiven us.

*The Wise and Foolish Virgins*

We must be vigilant and growing in our Christian life before we die.

*The Sheep and the Goats*

The Judgment Day will be based, at least in part, on how we have treated “the least of [Jesus'] brethren.”