

Parables in Matthew

Workbook

Hearing the Word, Parables in Matthew, Workbook

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(See separate file for parables only in Luke)

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Nigel Barge, April 2020

Scripture Quotations taken from

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Resources

The *New Bible Dictionary* 3rd edition, published by Inter Varsity Press
The *New Bible Commentary* 21st century edition. A commentary on every Bible book, IVP

www.blueletterbible.org

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Only in MATTHEW'S Gospel

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For similar studies on Parables found only in Luke's Gospel see *'Hearing the Word PARABLES Luke LG'* on the Website:

https://hearingtheword.org.uk

Hearing the Word: A Tool for Bible reading

Here is a pattern you may use to study a passage of the Bible. It helps if you then write down your own questions and answers in a notebook.



LOOK – What does it say?

1) The Text
   a) What questions does it raise -
   Who, What, When, Where, Why, hoW?
   b) What surprises you?
2) The Context?
   a) the surrounding text
   b) the Book of the Bible
   c) the whole Bible
   d) the place in the Bible Story



LEARN – What does it mean?

1) What type of writing is it?
2) Answer the questions
3) Summarise the passage



LISTEN – What is the message?

1) Which is the main point?
2) Which is the key verse?



LIVE – What is the response?

1) What does it show about God, *(Father, Son, Holy Spirit) :*
   a) His nature and character?
   b) His grace *
   c) Jesus / his salvation **
2) What should I do?

* God's undeserved generosity is evident throughout the Bible, and it is perfectly expressed in Jesus.

** The Bible, from 'the Fall' onwards, describes God's plan of salvation through his Son. Thus, all the Scriptures speak in some way of Jesus (Luke 24:27).

Sharing the Word

After carefully reading a passage of the Bible, and using the Hearng the Word Tool (p4) yourself, here is a pattern you might use to ***share your thoughts with others.***

Use

'Hearing the Word' can be used alone, with one other person, or in a group

Preparing for a group

Time put in alone beforehand will greatly benefit time spent together.
Work through the stages - LOOK, LEARN, LISTEN, LIVE.
Write down your own questions and answers

Format

LOOK & — **Go verse by verse** – Invite **short, direct** questions – (Who, What, When, Where, Why, hoW?) whether answers known or not. Answer each in turn. Look for other Bible parts that might be relevant.

LEARN — Pay attention to anything that **puzzles**

LISTEN — **– Share views on the Main Point and a Key Verse.**

LIVE — **– Respond**
What does it show of God / His grace/Jesus
What should be done, by first hearers/by me, today?

NB — Be sure to leave **adequate time** for the **LIVE** section..

Remember

As we gather round God's Word -

a. Listen to the views of others.
b. Make room for the novice. (They can join in too when you start by listing 'Any questions'.)
c. Don't let the 'knowledgeable' dominate. Encourage everyone to think for themselves.
d. Try to include others, especially 'seekers', in your time together.

* The **process** is explained and practiced in a four-hour course, suitable for all, called **'An Introduction to 'Hearing the Word'**
https://hearingtheword.org.uk

READING THE PARABLES

What is a parable?

A parable is a story told to a make a **single main point**. There may be other things to learn from it but these are secondary to its purpose. This is unlike an allegory in which everything has a meaning and an application.

e.g. 'Aesop's Fables' are parables
'Pilgrim's Progress' is an Allegory.

The details of the story of a parable are set out to emphasise the main point and do not necessarily correspond to reality *e.g.* The parable of the persistent widow is told to encourage us 'to pray and not to give up'. (Luke 18:1) The unjust judge is not meant to reflect God or his justice but rather to underline that if the widow received justice by persisting with a fallible, human judge, how much more will God, who is truly just, hear and respond to our prayers for justice and 'His Kingdom to come.'

The subject of Jesus' parables

Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the Good News of God. 'The time has come', he said. 'The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News!' (Mark 1:14,15)

In all the preaching and teaching of Jesus,

a) The subject was the Kingdom of God.
b) The message was 'the King comes'.
c) The command was to believe in and accept His benevolent rule.

Jesus taught about the Kingdom in Parables. Some are prefaced by the words, "The Kingdom of God is like" (literally, 'thus is the Kingdom of God'). However, in a general sense, all parables are 'of the Kingdom' in that they all describe in some way the relationship between God and people – the King and his subjects.

So it is possible to find God and ourselves within *all* Jesus' parables, and to identify the subject as some aspect of our relationship to 'the King'. Sometimes it is obvious, but other times it is more obscure. *For instance:*

a) Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30)

1. Jesus = the master
2. Us = a servant
3. Subject = stewardship of what God has given us

b) Parable of the two builders (Luke 6:47-49)

1. Jesus = the rock
2. Us = one of the builders
3. Subject = foundation/priority of our lives

The purpose of the parables

In using parables, Jesus had three intentions:

1) to teach

The Gospel writers tell us – *He taught them many things by parables and in his teaching said: "Listen, a farmer went out to sow…"* (Mark 4:2//Matthew 13:3)

Jesus spoke all these things to them in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet; "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world" (Matt 13:34).

Parables formed the backbone of Jesus' teaching. They were an effective teaching method, simple, direct and memorable, referring to everyday life, often using tangible objects to convey thoughts and concepts.

2) to disguise (!)

The meaning of the parable was not, in the first instance, intended to be plain to all. Strictly speaking, not all parables are 'illustrations', for illustrations are meant to shed light. After Jesus told the parable of the sower, Mark says:

> *When he was alone, the twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, 'The secret of the Kingdom has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven" ' (Mark 4:11,12, quoting Isaiah 6:9,10).*

This was probably to delay a superficial response; Jesus needed time to show that the long-awaited, all-conquering Messiah of Psalm 110 would not be the Roman-government-removing type of king expected, but would serve, suffer, die and be raised. (Matthew 16:16 with 16:21-23; Mark 10:42-45; Isaiah 53). Similarly, when the disciples first recognised he was the Messiah, he told them not to tell anyone *yet* who he was. Matt 16:20 // Mk 8:30 // Luke 9:21.

3) to encourage a response

The Kingdom of God is the unchallenged rule of Jesus. It comes when he is acknowledged and obeyed. This is what we ask for in the Lord's Prayer – *Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:10)*

Every parable of the Kingdom encourages its hearers to identify with the parable personally and to respond to the 'King' in the appropriate way. The parables are meant to put the hearers on the spot.

For those who *can* understand, who acknowledge the King, action is expected. After he told a parable Jesus said, 'He who has ears, let him hear' (Mark 4:10). In other words, 'If you understand what I am saying, act on it.'

The listeners heard and remembered the stories - but for the most part were unable to act on the parables because they did not yet acknowledge the secret of the Kingdom – Jesus *Himself* is King.

The context of a parable

Parables are often similes. 'The Kingdom of Heaven is *like*....'
But quite often bits of the story work in reverse: 'The Kingdom is *not* like….'

They can be metaphors, often referring to an easily imagined situation.

Sometimes Jesus begins, 'Suppose…' Luke 11:5, 15:4,8, which gives an easy clue that a parable follows; sometimes he begins, 'When…', (Luke 11:21) or 'There was…' (Luke 16:19) which could introduce fact or parable.

The situations are often described so vividly, like the robbery on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, we might remember them as if they were historical narrative. Their point is valid, even if the story did not actually happen.

To discern their meaning, parables have to be understood *in context,* provided before the story begins: *e.g. Luke 15:1-2, leading in to three parables.*

1) Who? It was told to specific people.. *e.g. Pharisees*
2) When? … in a particular circumstance… *they kept aloof from 'sinners'*
3) Why? … as something has prompted it… *'Jesus eats with sinners!'*
4) What? … for an action may be required *Welcome sinners, as God does.*

So the standard *Hearing the Word* pattern (p4, LEARN) varies slightly in this volume to cater for parables, as shown below:

Given that a parable describes the relationship between God and people

a) Where is God represented?
b) With whom are we meant to identify?
c) What is the subject?

NB In Matthew, Jesus' parables describe 'The Kingdom of Heaven…'
… whereas in Luke and Mark the phrase is 'The Kingdom of God'.

This is because Matthew is writing for a mainly Jewish audience, who avoided using the name of God directly, whereas Luke and Mark address a universal audience – Jew and Gentile.

Study 1 Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43

The weeds

Background information

This parable is the first of a series of three about growth (13:24-33).

In this one, there are two sowers and two kinds of seed. To sow darnel as an act of revenge was punishable in Roman law, so the parable may refer to a real-life situation. (Darnel was useful as fuel where wood was scarce.)

The call for patience is prominent in the story.

The explanation expands on the role of the Son of Man. He is not only the sower, as in 13:3-9, but the chief harvester, and owner of the kingdom.

Word List

24	*Kingdom of Heaven*	(a term used only in Matthew – 30 times) – the unchallenged rule of God as King. (Luke favours the phrase, 'Kingdom of God')
	is like	or *may be compared to* see also v31,33, etc
25	*weeds*	probably *darnel,* a poisonous plant related to wheat and virtually indistinguishable until the ears appear
30	*weeds burned*	i.e. destroyed
36	*left crowd*	explained to disciples then 'tested' them with another three parables (51)
37	*Son of Man*	OT term in Ezekiel (used 93 times) stresses the humanity of Jesus
39	*end of the age*	the Day of Judgment
41	*cause of sin*	literally *stumbling blocks* , *ie* people as in 16:23
43	*the righteous*	those who put their faith in God (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:1ff)

Bible Connections

41	*Son of Man sends out his angels*	*c.f.* 16:27; 25:31
	causes of sin (stumbling blocks)	people, as in 16:23
43	*shine like the sun*	Daniel 12:3

Study 2 Matthew 13:44-52

Hidden treasure, the Pearl & the Fishermen

Background information

Jesus, having declared that 'Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother' (12:50), goes on 'that same day' to teach in parables. (13:1)

To start with He is addressing a large crowd (13:2-34). However afterwards, He went into a house with his disciples and taught *them* (13:36-52). It was in this context that He told his disciple these last three parables.

Word List

48	*bad fish*	those that are inedible
49	*righteous*	those who are declared righteous by faith (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4)

Bible Connections

49	*wicked*	Matthew 12:39,45; 16:4; 18:32; 24:48; 25:2
	fiery furnace	Matthew 13:42
	weeping and gashing of teeth	Matthew 8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30
52	*Teacher of the Law*	Matthew 8:19; Mark12:32

Study 3 Matthew 18:21-35

The unforgiving servant

Background information

Rabbinical teaching said you should forgive someone three times.

The 'talent' was the highest unit of currency, worth two years of a labourer's wages; 'ten thousand' was the highest Greek numeral – a 'billion pounds' would convey the impression. (The total annual revenue for the province of Galilee at this period was 300 talents, so Jesus is using hyperbole).

In Jewish understanding, the heart is the governing centre of the body – physical, intellectual, psychological.

At v 22, some Greek manuscripts say, *seventy-seven times (77),* others *seventy times seven (70 x 7 = 490).*

Word List

24	*talents*	See above
27	*pity*	Compassion (c.f. 9:36)
28	*denarii*	One denarius was the daily wage for a labourer.
34	*jailers*	The Greek word means *torturers.*

Bible connections

21	*forgiveness*	6:12; Luke 23:34
22	*7 times*	Genesis 2:1
	77 times	Genesis 4:24 - Vengeance of Lamech.
27	*pity/compassion*	Psalm 103:13; Matthew 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34
	cancelling debt	Deuteronomy 15:1-11
33	*mercy*	5:7; 9:13; 23:23; Exodus 33:19; Ephesians 2:4
34	*God's anger*	Deuteronomy 4:25; Joshua 7:1; Psalm 7:11; Revelation 6:16; 19:15
	God's revenge	Deuteronomy 32:35
	God's forgiveness	Isaiah 1:18; Jeremiah 31:34; 1 John 1:9;
	punishment in the Parables	Matthew 13:42,50; 22:13; 25:30; 25:46
35	*forgiving and forgiveness*	Amos 1:3,6,9,11,13; 2:1,4,6; Matthew 5:7; 6:14,15; James 2:13; Ephesians 4:32)
	the measure you use will be applied to you.	Matthew 7:2

Study 4 Matthew 20:1-16

The workers in the vineyard

Background information

In Israel the harvest of grapes comes at the end of September, shortly before the rains come. There is urgency, so workers may be enlisted at any time as the farmers make haste.

The marketplace was the local 'labour exchange'. Casual workers waited there, hopeful that they might be employed for at least some of the day.

The Jewish timing was sunrise (approximately 6am) to sunset approximately 6pm), but they numbered the hours from 0 to 12. *i.e.* our 9am was the third hour, noon the sixth hour, 3pm the ninth hour etc

Word List

2	*A denarius*	a Roman coin: a basic, low wage for a day's work

Bible Connections

16	*the last will be first*	Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30

Study 5 Matthew 21:28-32

The parable of the two sons

Background information

Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem for the last time. He clashes with various religious leaders (21:15,23,45; 22:34,41). At the same time, the crowd, astonished at His teaching (22:33), accepted Him as a prophet (21:46).

In 21:23-27 Jesus deals with a 'high level deputation' from the Sanhedrin, who have come to question of His authority. He then tells three parables, all dealing with Who is acceptable to God and Who are His true people.

Word List

23	*chief priests and elders*	*ie* the Sanhedrin, the body responsible for maintaining order in civil and religious affairs.
31	*tax collectors and prostitutes*	Those most despised, and regarded as furthest from pleasing God.
32	*John*	*ie* John the Baptist *see* Matthew 3:1-12.
32	*way of righteousness*	Semitic for the *right way* *cf* Proverbs 8:20.

Bible Connections

For a different parable also concerning two sons, *see* Luke 15:11.

31	*'Truly I tell you'*	Occurs 31 times in Matthew's Gospel.
32	*John's message*	see Matt 3:1-12.

Study 6 Matthew 22:1-14

The wedding banquet

Background information

We are in the final week of Jesus' earthly life. He has made a triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the Sunday and is now teaching in the temple courts. The chief priests and the elders are continuing to oppose him.

In an era before clocks, invitations could specify the day of the feast, but not easily the precise time. The system was to send out servants on the day in question to all those who had already been invited (and had presumably accepted) to say, 'It's time; come now.'

The context of this parable (third in a related set) makes it clear that Jesus is still saying something about the religious leaders' failure to meet God's requirements and so being liable to judgment, with a consequent change in the composition of the people of God.

Word List

2	*banquet*	Symbolises the blessings of God's salvation
7	*city*	Refers to Jerusalem / Temp destroyed in AD70?
10	*good and bad*	Gospel attracts both good and bad
13	*wedding clothes*	Not special garment but **clean** clothes, likely white
14	*the invited*	Literally 'the called'

Bible Connections

Similar parable: Luke 16:14

5	*field… business given higher priority*	*see* Matthew 6:24
11	*wedding clothes cf 'fine linen, clean and white'* (KJV)	Revelation 19:8

Study 7 Matthew 25:1-13

The ten virgins

Background information

At a wedding in Jesus' day, it was the practice for the bridegroom to call on his bride and her attendants. The tradition was to surprise them any day and any time – they were to be ready.

The wedding party then went through the village to their new home, gathering their friends for a celebration in their house. After they arrived, the door was closed. Late comers were excluded.

(Another important point is that people were not allowed in the streets after dark without a lamp.)

Word List

1	*virgins*	Attendants of the bride, participants in the bridal party
	ten	In Hebrew it signifies the divine judgment of God according to His Law.
6	*midnight*	Literally – middle of night (6pm – 6 am)
12	*I tell you the truth*	emphatic (repeated 30 times in Matthew's gospel)

Bible Connections

1	*bridegroom* –	OT reference to God: Isaiah 54:4-5; 62:5; Jeremiah 2:2; Hosea 1-3 etc.
11	*too late*	*c.f.* Hebrews 3:7 to 4:13
12	*I do not know you*	Matthew 7:22,23

Study 8 Matthew 25:31-46

The sheep and the goats

Background information

Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the last week of his earthly life (21:1ff). The main theme of his teaching during this time was the last judgement. It reaches its finale in this parable.

The parable describes a herd of sheep and goats which, in the middle east of that time, looked very similar when they were grazed together. When the time came, they were split up.

Today's method of doing this is to make the flock walk along a thin passage, single file, to a 'Y' junction, which has a door that can swing to block one or other of the two passages. The farmer operates the gate as each animal passes him and so he separates each one to right or left.

Jesus uses such an analogy to describe God's separation of the nations before Him on the day of Judgement.

Word List

31	*Son of man*	used by God of Ezekiel often meaning human being used by Jesus to describe Himself – equal to God (Philippians 2:6), he was 'veiled' in flesh. (1 John 4:2) but truly human.
37	*righteous*	Those set right with God through their faith in Him. (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:1; c.f. Ephesians 2:8,9)
41	*angel*	*(Greek angelos)* Messenger / bearer of good news

Bible Connections

32	*all nations*	Daniel 7:14; Matthew 28:14
41	*brothers - those wo do the will of My Father in Heaven*	Matthew 12:50

"I can read the Bible for myself!"

To show that the Bible is accessible to all, the Rev Nigel Barge, minister of Torrance Parish Church from 1991-2021, devised a tool called 'Hearing the Word'.

The Manual explains the basic principles of Bible reading, teaches them by means of an interactive course, and practices them on a single passage, Mark 10:35-45.

Participants follow in a Workbook: *Hearing the Word – Introduction*, which includes the next six passages in Mark, so they may follow on for themselves.

As the principles apply equally to all, the course will both instruct the novice and refresh the 'hardened' Bible student!

Further Study Guides cover various genres of Bible material – Narrative, Poetry, Law, Letters, Prophecy etc.
For the current list of material, please see

https://hearingtheword.org.uk