

Living a Life of Faith
A Four Week Bible Study on Select Parables of Jesus
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Introduction to the Parables:

Jesus often spoke through parables, narrative stories that held a message beneath the service. However, even after thousand of years of studying these stories, Christians today still often are just as confused as the first disciples as to their meaning. What exactly is Jesus trying to communicate to us - simply something that we should believe or a way to live that may change our lives as well as the lives of others?

These stories of Jesus are often memorable because they call us to examine ourselves. They are also memorable, at times, because they are so foreign to the way we live our lives today. Over the next four weeks, I would like to invite you into a study of scripture that asks you to examine, both individually and as a faith community, how you live out the faith Jesus is calling us to through the parables.

Parables are meant to be studied over and over, because their message is so central to who we are as Christians. Further, the message is multi-layered, asking us to peel it back piece by piece, discovering something new. Parables are composed to transform us, slowly, for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Brief Word about Format:

As United Methodists we believe that we can examine our lives through four lenses: Scripture (being the primary source), tradition, reason, and experience. While most Bible studies start and end with Scripture, and rarely address the other parts of the quadrilateral, this Bible study starts with our reason and experience and then examines it through the context of scripture and tradition of interpretation. While this may seem a bit odd at first, I would encourage you to experiment with this format in your small group, learning from the wisdom that God has graced each of us with. Further, this Bible Study does not provide you with the “right” answer to questions. Instead, questions are posed for your discussion in order to interact with the scripture and each other.

Time Frame for Each Session (apx 1 hours)

Gathering Together -Light a candle and have an opening prayer lead by various group members

Entering into Community - Begin with framed question about participants and their experience

Folding in the Text - Read the scripture provided

Discussion question on scripture

Another angle - Interweaving of biblical scholars - some passages may be provided, but the leader each week is encouraged to find more materials, in order to have a variety of voices concerning the text

Creative Engagement - Creative activity

Ritual ending - Closing prayer followed by extinguish candle

Note: You will find further explanation for each particular section of the time frame in week one's study.

Week One
Parable of the Good Samaritan

Text: Luke 10: 24-37

Phase One – Gathering Together (5 Minutes)

The group gathers together and one of the members who is not leading the discussion for the day lights a candle and says “may the Spirit enter here”, symbolizing the presence of the Holy Spirit amongst the group members.

Phase Two – Entering into Community (15 minutes)

The participants are invited to engage both their own stories and the text, through Lectio Divina and the asking of two to three structured questions by the leader of the day that intend to address the following: ‘how does this topic relate to you?’ or ‘how does this topic relate to your community?’ The point of the questions and sacred reading is to set a different tenor for the Bible study.

Discussion Questions:

The following questions are posed in a thoughtful way by the leader and people are asked to answer the questions as they feel lead, with the hope of allowing each participant a time to talk if they so choose.

- When you hear the phrase “good Samaritan” what do you think of? What situations or words come to your mind?
- Tell of a time when you were the recipient of someone being a good Samaritan. What was that experience like? How did it make you feel? How did it change you?

Phase Three – Unfolding the Text (15 minutes)

Here the text is given its own voice. It should be addressed on its own terms by reading it different ways. Some suggestions include having people take turns read as much or as little of the text as they desire, or repeating specific words, or reading the text in different languages, or call and response, etc. There should be multiple pre-selected translations (2-3) present, in order to ensure diversity in translations.

Read Text: Luke 10: 25-37

Textual Focus Questions:

- What word or phrase struck you from today’s passages? What does that mean to you in this moment? What thoughts and feelings does it cause to arise?
- What is significant about the fact a lawyer is the one who poses the question “what must I do to inherit eternal life” to Jesus?

- Why did Jesus answer the man's question with a question? Does Jesus ever answer your longings with a question instead of a direct answer?
- Look up Lev. 19:18. How does this related to verse 27? When do you try to limit God's call to being a neighbor?
- Why did Jesus choose the example of a Samaritan when the lawyer asked "who is my neighbor?"
- Why did the priest and the levite pass the man who was robbed by?
- Have you ever been moved by pity or compassion to care for a stranger? Share about this time.
- How would you react if you were the inn keeper, being instructed to care for a stranger?
- How are mercy and being a good neighbor connected? How is this related to Micah 6:8?

Phase Four – Another Angle (10 minutes)

Add one to three more voices to the discussion of the text such as pieces of art or experts of academic articles, etc. This section should involve different senses when possible.

"Luke provides two examples to demonstrate the relationship between hospitality and ministry. A Samaritan helps a victim of violence. Luke does not designate the Samaritan as 'good'. Neither does he specifically identify the race of the beaten man. The Samaritan's merciful behavior is highlighted; it is paradigmatic of Jesus' own work and the work Jesus expects from his disciples."¹

Reflection Questions:

- Do you find yourself only helping people to look good? What is your motivation for reaching out to others in need?
- What does Jesus require of his disciples? How are you living into this expectation?

Phase Five - Creative Engagement (10 minutes)

A retelling of the text in light of the community. The expression and mode of this retelling will shift for each session and may include constructing a mural, writing a prayer, rewrite the text from a different perspective, writing back to the author, a dramatization, etc. This is an invitation to be creative.

Write a letter to Jesus responding to his parable. What do you think a good neighbor is? How is this in line with today's scripture or different? What is difficult about being a good Samaritan? How does your Church show compassion and mercy? What are you committed to?

¹ Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder, "The Gospel of Luke" in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, ed. Brian K. Blount, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 170.)

Phase Six – Ritual Ending (5 minutes)

Share in a closing prayer. Extinguishing the candle and add a sentence each week to the closing prayer that reflects what the community experienced (“may the spirit go with us as we...”).

Week Two
Parable of the Persistent Widow

Text: Luke 18: 1-8

Phase One – Gathering Together (5 Minutes)

The group gathers together and one of the members who is not leading the discussion for the day lights a candle and says “may the Spirit enter here”, symbolizing the presence of the Holy Spirit amongst the group members.

Phase Two – Entering into Community (15 minutes)

Discussion Questions:

- When is a time you persistently had to pray for something? What did it feel like to go back to God with the same request time after time? Did you think God was ignoring you? How did the situation work out?

Phase Three – Unfolding the Text (15 minutes)

Read Text: Luke 18: 1-8

Textual Focus Questions:

- What word or phrase struck you from today’s passages? What does that mean to you in this moment? What thoughts and feelings does it cause to arise?
- Why is it important that we are told that the judge did not fear God or respect the people?
- Look at Deut 10: 17-18. Why is the fact that a widow is crying for justice uplifted in the parable?
- What is the point of the parable - the judge’s indifference or the fact that he eventually listened?
- Is God being compared to the unjust judge in this parable? Why or why not?
- What do you find yourself crying out to God for day and night? Do you expect God to respond?

Phase Four – Another Angle (10 minutes)

“Reformed theology, John Calvin in particular, has always emphasized that we cannot separate who God is and what God does from who we are and what we are called to do. God’s sovereignty over all areas of our life does not allow for a disconnection of private and public faith life.”²

“Jesus says, ‘God will not delay. God will help. God will grant justice.’ If the Son of Man is to find faith on earth, we must understand that our prayers do not constitute so

² Margit Ernst-Habib, “Luke 18: 1-8: Theological Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, eds. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 188

many unanswered pleas; rather, they are our participation in the coming reign of God. By praying continually, and not giving up hope, we live in the surety that God has not abandoned this world. Living in hope, we work, in whatever ways we can, for the justice and peace that is coming.”³

Reflection Questions:

- How are work and prayer connected? What does this say about our hope in the justice and peace of God?
- How are our living prayers present in our personal and communal life?
- Why do you pray? What do your prayers say about who you believe God to be?

Phase Five - Creative Engagement (10 minutes)

All too often we pray about something once or twice and fail to be persistent in our prayers. Draw a picture of what you believe this passage of scripture would look like and hang it in a place you see often. Every time you see the picture may it be a reminder to pray without ceasing.

Phase Six – Ritual Ending (5 minutes)

Share in a closing prayer. Extinguishing the candle and add a sentence each week to the closing prayer that reflects what the community experienced (“may the spirit go with us as we...”).

Week Three
Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

³ Kimberly Bracken Long, “Luke 18: 1-8: Pastoral Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, eds. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 190.

Text: Matthew 20: 1-16

Phase One – Gathering Together (5 Minutes)

The group gathers together and one of the members who is not leading the discussion for the day lights a candle and says “may the Spirit enter here”, symbolizing the presence of the Holy Spirit amongst the group members.

Phase Two – Entering into Community (15 minutes)

Discussion Questions:

- When you are honest with yourself, why do you serve God? To get a reward? To be noticed? For praise? Because God says so?
- How do you feel about working with others for the purpose of God? Do you only like to work with some people? All of God’s children? Why?
- How do you react when God doesn’t respond or act as you expect?

Phase Three – Unfolding the Text (15 minutes)

Read Text: Matthew 20: 1-16

Textual Focus Questions:

- What word or phrase struck you from today’s passages? What does that mean to you in this moment? What thoughts and feelings does it cause to arise?
- A phrase that is often thrown around is “the last shall be first”. Do you believe this to be true? How does this phrase make you feel?
- The usual day wage was enough to feed a family. How do you react to all the workers receiving the same wage, no matter how long they worked for the landowner?
- Who do you identify with most in this parable? Why?
- The workers are told they will be paid “whatever is right”, in other words, whatever is just. Why would the landowner state the wage this way? Who decides what is just in our lives?
- When are times when you have become envious of others because of God’s generosity?
- How is this parable connected to the previous teaching in Luke 19: 16-30?
- Describe a time when God’s reasoning was not the same as yours. What was the outcome?

Phase Four – Another Angle (10 minutes)

“The workers must recognize the opportunity to work in the vineyard (whether it represents Israel, individual virtue, the church, or the cause of justice in the world) as a gift in itself. There is no room for human pride, since one’s only choice is either to

answer the call to work in God's Kingdom, or to stand idle and waste one's life altogether."⁴

"Dorothy Day notes this subversive and unsettling use of wages: '[Jesus] spoke of a living wage, not equal pay for equal work, in the parable of those who came first and the eleventh hour.' A living wage for everyone, rather than the competitive struggle and inequality of the marketplace. Plenty, but not too much. The parable thus envisions an alternative social order."⁵

Reflection Questions:

- After exploring this text, we return to one of the questions first posed: why do you work for God? What is your motivation for Kingdom work? What do you think your Church's motivation is?
- When has human pride stopped you or your Church from working for justice?
- How does this passage relate to relevant social issues of our day such as living wage and immigration?

Phase Five - Creative Engagement (10 minutes)

_____ Put on a play, acting out this text. What does bring the text to life help you realize about the part you play in God's Kingdom?

Phase Six – Ritual Ending (5 minutes)

Share in a closing prayer. Extinguishing the candle and add a sentence each week to the closing prayer that reflects what the community experienced ("may the spirit go with us as we...").

⁴ Kathryn D. Blanchard, "Matthew 20: 1-16: Theological Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 92.

⁵ Charles Campbell, "Matthew 20: 1-16: Homiletical Perspective in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 95.

Week Four
Purpose of Parable and Parable of the Lamp

Text: Mark 4: 10-25

Phase One – Gathering Together (5 Minutes)

The group gathers together and one of the members who is not leading the discussion for the day lights a candle and says “may the Spirit enter here”, symbolizing the presence of the Holy Spirit amongst the group members.

Phase Two – Entering into Community (15 minutes)

Discussion Questions:

- How do you and your Church shine forth the light of Jesus Christ?
- When do you find it most difficult to share your light or most tempting to hide your faith?
- What have you learned about living your faith through the study of the parables?

Phase Three – Unfolding the Text (15 minutes)

Read Text: Mark 4: 10-25

Textual Focus Questions:

- What word or phrase struck you from today’s passages? What does that mean to you in this moment? What thoughts and feelings does it cause to arise?
- How can you relate to the disciples asking Jesus about the parables he was teaching? Do you feel like you have been given to secret of the Kingdom? Why or why not?
- When was a time that you felt you did not understand what Jesus was teaching? How did you respond? What was the outcome?
- What part of the parable of the sower resonates with you at this stage of your faith journey?
- Describe different ways that people fall away. How do you overcome this struggle?
- What ways have you found to cultivate the skill of paying attention and listening to what you hear Jesus calling you to do?
- How is the activity of the Kingdom of God recognizable?
- How is our view of success or failure of the Kingdom of God lifted up in this parable?

Phase Four – Another Angle (10 minutes)

“In looking at the Gospel of Mark as a whole, one recognizes that Jesus is a preacher of the word of God and all the people and groups who hear him respond to the word he preaches in one of the four ways described.”⁶

Reflection Questions:

How do you find yourself responding to Jesus’s preaching through parables?
How has this study equipped you to live your faith because of Jesus’s teachings?
How has the study influenced your view on how to reach other’s with the gospel message?

Phase Five - Creative Engagement (10 minutes)

Create a collage to represent on of the parables we have studied together the last four weeks. What is important about the parable you have chosen? What is it trying to communicate and how has it impacted your faith life?

Phase Six – Ritual Ending (5 minutes)

Share in a closing prayer. Extinguishing the candle and add a sentence each week to the closing prayer that reflects what the community experienced (“may the spirit go with us as we...”).

⁶ Mary Ann Tolbert, “Mark” in *Women’s Bible Commentary: Expanded Edition*, eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992 (1998)), 353.