

Short Stories by Jesus

Session 1: Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son

- **Opening Prayer**

Dear Lord, as we begin our study of your parables, help us to uncover new truths they hold for us today. In your precious name we pray. Amen.

- **Introduction**

- What is a parable to you?
- What are the characteristics of a good parable?

- **Scripture** – Read Luke 15:1-7, 8-10, 11-32

- Before this chapter, what were your feelings about the message of the Parable of the Lost Son?
- Was it allegorical - did the people in the parable represent someone to you?

- **DVD** – Session 1 [11:08]

- How did Jesus “blow up” the story in the Parable of the Lost Son?
- Do you think it odd that the Jewish stories favor the younger son? (e.g., Cain/Abel, Ishmael/Isaac, Esau/Jacob)
- No one called the older brother. Whose fault is that?
- Interpretations:
 - Reconciliation
 - Repentance
 - Forgiveness
 - Just go to lunch
 - Making sure everyone is counted
 - When have you felt “not counted”?

- **Book Discussion – Session 1: Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son**

- How do the following titles predispose you to different interpretations of the parable?
 - The Prodigal Son
 - The Lost Son
 - The Father Who Lost His Son(s)
 - The Prodigal and the Prudent
 - The Clever Son
 - The Absent Mother
 - <any others from your Bibles?>
- How is Jesus challenging *you* with these three parables?
- What have you lost in life that you might go through great lengths to find?
- What do you fear losing?
- What do you think motivated the younger son to take his inheritance and go?
- Do you think he was repentant, or just hungry?
- There’s no explicit closure in the parable. What do you think happens next?
- What do you think about the father, especially with regard to:

- Giving his son the inheritance
- Welcoming him back in the way he did
- Treatment of the older brother
- With whom do you identify most closely in the parable? Why?
- Why does Luke set up the three parables with verses 1-2...?

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

- Luke 15:7 and 15:10 appear to be statements in which Jesus interprets the first two parables...

I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Levine suggests this may be Luke editorializing. What are your reactions to this?

- In what ways have you been guilty of not counting others?
- How can we make sure others feel counted?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer [from Leader Guide]**

You know us all, Lord Jesus, and you know those whom we do not. Forgive us when we lose those who are precious to you, by what we do or by what we fail to do. Send us in your Spirit's power to them, that we may rejoice together as children of your Father in heaven, and ours. Amen.

References for material:

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Italics imply important points or example answers the leader can convey

Session 2: The Good Samaritan

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, as we discuss the familiar story of The Good Samaritan, help us to be sincere about which of the figures we most emulate, and which we wish to. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

- **Scripture** – Read Luke 10:25-37

- In a secular sense, what has the phrase *Good Samaritan* come to mean?
- What personal experiences have you had that you associate with *The Good Samaritan*?

- **DVD** – Session 2 [12:00]

- What are different definitions/connotations of the word *neighbor*?
- Do you consider Catholics as Christian neighbors?
- With whom do you tend to identify in this parable?
- Priest-Levite-Israelite/Samaritan
 - Do you agree with equating Samaritans with Hitler, Satan, Hamas members, and Bin Laden?
 - What might a better analogy be?
 - If you wrote yourself into the parable, who might the modern-day personalities be?
- What are the essential elements of **compassion** (*compati = suffer with*)?
- From whom do you find it difficult to receive help?
- Why is it hard for us to accept compassion?

- **Book Discussion – Session 2: The Good Samaritan**

- The lawyer asks “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”
 - Is that a common religious question we ask today?
- Do you find it interesting that the lawyer uses the word “inherit” in his question about what to do?
- Why wasn't the lawyer satisfied with Jesus' affirmation of the two commandments to inherit eternal life?
- In what ways can you identify with the:
 - Man who was attacked
 - Robbers
 - Samaritan
 - Innkeeper
- What other lessons might there be in this parable besides “help those in need, no matter who they are”? *don't be prejudiced; be compassionate about doing good; set an example; watch out for hypocrisy*
- Who are your enemies today?
 - Would you expect them to help you or pass you by?
- What do you think about MLK's explanation that the priest and the Levite didn't stop because they were afraid?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer [from Leader Guide]**

Lord Jesus, you command us to love our enemies. Teach us that this love is not so much about what we feel as about what we do, and strengthen us, by your Spirit, to see, to touch, to provide for, to heal, and to care in practical ways for those we may be unable even to bring ourselves to name, that we may be children of your

Father in heaven and ours, who causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and who sends rain to shower both those who are righteous and those who are not. Amen.

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Session 3: The Pearl of Great Price

- **Opening Prayer**

Dear Father, help us to identify and better appreciate the essential things in our lives, and the lives of others. In your Son's holy name we pray. Amen.

- **Scripture** – Read Matthew 13:45-46

- **DVD** – Session 3 [8:38]

- How does the length of this parable affect the way you have approached it in the past?
- What are techniques you use to make sure you don't rip through the parables, or any scripture, too fast?
- What is the most important thing in your life?
- What things which others might consider to be pearls of great price do you currently have and maybe take for granted?

- **Book Discussion – Session 3: The Pearl of Great Price**

- Levine notes several allegories which scholars and pastors adopt when interpreting this parable, rather than a simple historical context
 - Do you think we overthink these parables sometimes?
- How does seeing the “merchant” in the negative context shared by first century Jews alter your perspective on the parable?
- Why do you think Jesus said the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant rather than the pearl?
- Is there any “pearl” for which you strive and would go so far as to give up your very identity (or have you already done so)?
- This parable is preceded by Matthew 13:44:
The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.
 - How is this the same or different from the parable of the Pearl of Great Price?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer [from Leader Guide]**

Holy God, through Jesus Christ, your inexpressibly precious gift, you challenged us to give up earthly treasures and to store up for ourselves treasures in heaven, where thieves cannot steal and rust cannot destroy. Challenge us again, this day and every day, to seek what you would most have us find, to your glory and for the good of our neighbor; and may your Spirit keep us strong in answering that challenge, day by day. Amen.

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Session 4: The Mustard Seed

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, may your seed of inspiration take root in our hearts this day, and grow to a greater awareness and understanding of your purpose for our lives. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

- **Information**

- Mustard seed: 1-2mm (orchid seeds are even smaller – like dust)
 - In the eyes of a first-century farmer, the black mustard seed was likely the smallest seed in that region
- Mustard bush: 6-20 feet (black mustard: up to 12 feet)
- Common in Pakistan/India/Canada/Nepal

- **Scripture** – Read Mark 4:30-32; Matthew 13:31; Luke 13:18-19 [everyone should follow along in their Bibles]

- What do all three have in common?
- What are the differences?
- Why do you think there are differences?
- What interpretations of the parable have you heard?
 - *Growth of God's kingdom / church*
 - *Birds represent the gathering of nations into God's people*
 - *Natural, inevitable growth of God's kingdom*
 - *Eternal life*
 - *Seed = Faith*
 - *Seed = Message of the Gospel*
- Which of these hit/miss the mark for you?

- **DVD** – Session 4 [9:52]

- "Hard to have faith without doubt"
 - Do you agree this strengthens our faith? Why?
- *Parables = "Opportunities for conversation"*
- "Power of the individual"
 - Do you typically consider the efforts of a single individual insignificant in the context of the world, or do you embrace the butterfly effect?
- Is it important to you that parables are open to interpretation, or is it more important to understand what Jesus intended?
 - Is the interpretation of the Bible different than the interpretation of secular literature?
 - Levine says as long as you draw something good from your interpretation, "it's a good reading." Do you agree?
- *Seed is so tiny it's difficult to imagine what the Kingdom of Heaven is, but as it grows I come to an understanding and things become clear... "I can almost taste it"*

- **Book Discussion – Session 4: The Mustard Seed**

- Juxtaposition with the Parable of the Yeast (Matthew 13:33 & Luke 13:20-21)
 - 3 measures = 40-60lbs
 - How do the two parables fit together?

- Some interpretations suggest the mustard seed or leaven as unclean, and represent outsider threats to Jewish laws of purity.
 - What is your reaction to such interpretations?
- Key interpretations by Levine:
 - No seed is insignificant – each contains life
 - What does our society hold about who/what is significant?
 - Even small actions can produce great things
 - Can you give examples?
 - We are part of a larger process. We may initiate an action, but it can progress without our involvement.
 - Can you give examples?
 - Is it easy or hard for you to do this?
- How do you understand the phrase “the Kingdom of God”?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer [from Leader Guide]**

Loving God, giver of life and gracious provider, we praise you for calling us into your kingdom through your Son Jesus, and we pray that we will spread your loving rule through knowing when to act and when to wait upon you. Amen.

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Session 5: The Laborers in the Vineyard

- **Opening Prayer**

Lord Father, we thank you for employing us, and we wish to labor hard for you. Put us to work in your vineyard. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

- **Opening Discussion**

- Describe the best boss you ever had. Worst boss?

- **Scripture** – Read Matthew 20:1-16

- Who would you think the different people represent in this parable?
- With whom do you most closely identify?
- How would you characterize the workers? The landowner?
- Context of the parable (Read Matthew 19:23-28)
 - Why might Jesus have told this parable after saying this?

- **DVD** – Session 5 [11:03]

- What's the weirdest thing about this parable to you?
- Did your parents tell you that life isn't fair?
 - Do you think life should be fair? Why/why not?
- Information
 - *Not about **salvation** but **daily wage and love of neighbor***
 - *Most identify with the daily laborers*
 - *Earlier workers don't say a word about the people who are left behind*
 - *Jewish sources indicate that a householder was obligated to pay the going rate*
- Do you think this was "just"? What is the difference between "fairness" and "justice"?
- Do you see the parallel to choosing sides on the playground?
- Is this parable about solidarity and looking out for the disadvantaged?
- What economic system is most in line with Jesus' teaching?
 - Is this still true for us today?
 - Does interpreting it this way, as well as other passages like Acts, make you uncomfortable?
- Is there a message about labor unions here? What are the benefits/disadvantages of unions?
- Are we guilty of allegorizing the parables away from our daily living, pocketbooks, and personal ethics, instead mapping them to "ways to get into heaven"?

- **Book Discussion – Session 5: The Laborers in the Vineyard**

- Why might the householder have gone back three times, rather than hiring everyone up front?
- Was there any difference cited among the groups of people hired?
- [79] Levine claims "The last will be first and the first will be last" actually contradicts the parable since everyone is paid the same amount. Do you agree?
- Have you experienced inequity in pay in your career? How did you address it?
- Have you experienced differences in hours worked with the same pay?
- Are there any anti-Semitic connotations someone might incorrectly read into the parable?
- Who do you think is the "last" who will be "first" in our society?
- Were the first-hired workers wrong to complain?
- Was the landowner's explanation sufficient?

- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer [from Leader Guide]**

Ever-living, ever-giving God: may your Spirit move us to act with generosity, being especially generous toward those who have little in a world where others have too much. Make us restless for a world where, as in your kingdom to come, all have what they need to live. Stir us to make changes, beginning in our own lives, for the sake and glory of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Session 6: The Widow and the Judge

- **Opening Prayer**

Lord Jesus, we thank you for your gift of the parables. Although we sometimes struggle to understand them, we thank you for any and all enlightenment that our struggle brings. In Your holy name we pray. Amen.

- **Opening Discussion**

- What images come to mind when you think of widows? Judges?

- **Scripture** – Read Luke 18:1-8

- Why do you think Jesus used a judge who “neither feared God nor had respect for people”?
- Why does he include that last sentence – “And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” [told right after he described His second coming]

- **DVD** – Session 6 [10:30]

- *Two possible interpretations*
 - *Praying always*
 - *Anticipating Jesus’ second coming who will bring about justice*
- “If you strip out... what comes before and what comes after”
 - Is this fair to do?
- Am I on the side of the widow?
- How do I understand the judge?
- Do courts today have the same practice of allowing you to pay your way out of cases?
- Where is the power today for dispensing justice?
- How much do you think the evangelists have inserted their own interpretations in the Gospels?
- Do you want judges today to be religious?
- Do you agree that the parables offer the latitude to interpret and develop your own ethical sense which is more likely to guide your life?
- Other comments from the video?

- **Book Discussion – Session 6: The Widow and the Judge**

- Greek word “ekdikeo” (let me be avenged)
 - What’s the difference between justice and vengeance?
 - At what point does a prison sentence become vengeance rather than justice?
- Levine writes that the parable lacks closure because there’s no attempt to find reconciliation.
 - Do you agree?
 - Does anyone come out looking positive?
- Do you think the interpretation of the need for constant prayer is good enough?
 - Do you see any problems with doing so?
- Are there situations in which it is appropriate to badger or to threaten violence?
- How do things look from the perspective of the widow’s adversary? What lesson might he learn?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer [from Leader Guide]**

Holy God, we thank you for continuing to challenge us through the parables of your Son, Jesus, who became for us wisdom from on high. Even as we proclaim him as Savior, may we never forget how his disciples also called

him “Teacher,” and may your Spirit keep us always open to his lessons about what it means to truly live – not only in the world to come, but in this world that you have given all people – as those who know and do your will. Amen.

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