



Full product can be ordered by calling
1-800-333-8300 or by visiting
www.FaithAliveResources.org

show me 

sample

Faith Alive Christian Resources

Property of Faith Alive Christian Resources. All rights reserved.

Discover Your Bible Series

Discover **THE PARABLES OF JESUS**



LEADER GUIDE

LEADER GUIDE

Discover
**THE PARABLES
OF JESUS**



by
Paul Faber



Grand Rapids, Michigan

The writer of this study is grateful for the helpful insights and research of John Timmer in his book *The Kingdom Equation: A Fresh Look at the Parables of Jesus* (Faith Alive, 2008, Second Edition), from which portions of the lesson material derive.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in this publication are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION, © 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Cover photo: Getty

Discover Your Bible series. *Discover the Parables of Jesus* (Leader Guide), © 2008 by Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560. All rights reserved. With the exception of brief excerpts for review purposes, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher. Printed in the United States of America.

We welcome your comments. Call us at 1-800-333-8300 or e-mail us at editors@faithaliveresources.org.

ISBN 978-1-59255-456-0

5 4 3 2 1

Contents

To the Leader	4
Introduction	6
Glossary of Terms.....	7
Lesson 1	
Why Did Jesus Teach in Parables?	10
Lesson 2	
The Great Banquet	20
Lesson 3	
The Merciful Samaritan	28
Lesson 4	
“There Was a Man Who Had Two Sons . . .”.....	36
Lesson 5	
The Dishonest Manager	45
Lesson 6	
The Respectable Citizen and the Despicable Sinner	53
An Invitation and Prayer of Commitment	61
Bibliography	62
Evaluation Questionnaire	

To the Leader

Prepare the Lesson

This leader guide is meant to assist you as a small group leader but not to substitute for your own work. As you prepare to lead each lesson, work first through the questions in the study guide. Then use the leader material to enrich your understanding of the passage. Prepare thoroughly before leading each group session so that you can lead without frequent references to notes. This approach will free you to concentrate on leadership responsibilities, keep eye contact with group members, and listen carefully.

Get Ready to Lead

Learn to think in terms of questions. As you prepare to lead a lesson, ask yourself questions and try to discover the answers yourself. This will prepare you to anticipate group members' questions and thus help others discover truths from God's Word.

Lead with Questions

Use questions to direct the group discussion. Draw out positive contributions by asking questions. Break down difficult or unclear questions into smaller, concise ones. Also use questions to respond to wrong or problematic answers. If you learn to lead others to truth by questions, you will be a good Bible discovery leader. The questions in this study are designed to be used with the New International Version of the Bible, but other translations can also be used.

Help to Apply

Gently help group members discover the meaning of God's message for their own lives. Be careful not to be judgmental of persons who may not yet seem to be applying the truths you encounter together. It's the Spirit's work to apply God's Word to people's hearts. Tactfully let the group know how the Spirit is applying the Word in your own heart and life. Pray faithfully for the Spirit's work in others.

While giving people the time and space to apply biblical truths as the Spirit leads them, simply try to help group members see that there is a relationship between the Bible and life. Questions for reflection at the end of each session invite everyone to take time for personal reflection and optional sharing. Try to offer at least a few minutes for reflection time toward the end of each lesson, and encourage group members to do follow-up reflection at home.

Leadership Training

If more than one group in your setting is using this Bible study, we strongly encourage leaders to meet regularly for discussion of the lessons, for prayer, and for mutual support.

If this study is being used in a Coffee Break Small Groups program, each leader should have a copy of the *Coffee Break Evangelism Manual with Director's Handbook*. This book is a basic "how-to" guide for establishing and leading a Bible discovery group. Reread the book or portions of it periodically and review it at the beginning of each season.

Leaders will also find it helpful to attend one or more of the many leadership training workshops offered each year in connection with small group ministry.

For more information,

- call toll-free 1-888-644-0814, e-mail smallgroups@crcna.org, or visit www.FaithAliveResources.org/DYB (for training advice and general information)
- call toll-free 1-800-333-8300 or visit www.FaithAliveResources.org (to order materials)

Introduction

Anyone who came to listen to Jesus soon learned that he was a storyteller. Jesus told stories that would stay with you. He'd often use simple, everyday characters and situations—and yet he'd add some unusual twist that was hard to forget. It might make you shake your head, but you couldn't shake the truth of it.

Sometimes the story would weigh heavily on you. It might even make you want to change the way you lived.

That was the point.

When Jesus came to live and teach among us, he came not just to tell stories. He came to tell us and show us (through his entire life) about the kingdom of God. Everywhere he went, the main point of Jesus' message was "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). Then he would often say, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like . . . ?" (4:30), and he would tell a *parabolic story* (parable) to teach something crucial about God's kingdom.

Jesus often also healed people of their ailments and diseases. Sometimes he even brought people back from death to life!

In all these ways Jesus showed people just how near the kingdom of God was and that *it is coming*—into our world, into our lives, into our heads and hearts.

Jesus is no ordinary teacher, and his parables are no ordinary stories. Let's listen to a few in this brief study. Let's see what Jesus wants to show and tell us about the kingdom of God.

Glossary of Terms

angels—supernatural beings created by God to be messengers, to carry out God’s will in this world, and to serve and care for all who belong to God (Ps. 91:11-12).

the devil—also called Satan (which means “accuser”—see Zech. 3:1); this term refers to the fallen angel who tempted humanity to sin and wants to destroy God’s kingdom. The Bible refers to this being as “the evil one” (Matt. 6:13; 13:19); “a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8); “the great dragon . . . that ancient serpent called the devil, Satan, who leads the whole world astray” (Rev. 12:9; see Gen. 3); and more. When Jesus conquered sin and death for our sake, he dealt Satan a fatal blow (see Gen. 3:14-15) and destroyed his power to accuse us of our sins before God (Col. 2:13-15). At the end of time, Jesus will completely defeat Satan (Rev. 20:7-10). Though Satan is still powerful today, he cannot snatch us from God’s hand (John 10:27-30).

dropsy—also called edema, a medical condition resulting in swelling from a fluid buildup in connective tissue (tendons and ligaments).

evil one—see **devil**

good news—this term (same as the word *gospel*) refers to the Bible’s central message of salvation from sin through Jesus Christ to eternal life in the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15; John 3:16; Rom. 1:16-17).

Isaiah—one of the major prophets of Israel. Isaiah prophesied from 740-681 B.C. and delivered a number of clear prophecies about the Messiah of Israel (Jesus Christ).

Israel—this name commonly refers to God’s chosen people, the descendants of Jacob (whom God renamed Israel—Gen. 32:28).

Jericho—formerly an ancient Canaanite city that was destroyed when the Lord first led the Israelites into the promised land (Josh. 6).

Jerusalem—This ancient city became the capital of the Old Testament kingdom of Israel; King Solomon built the temple of the Lord there. After the kingdom of Israel was divided and the people were later exiled and then freed to return, the city and temple were rebuilt.

Jews—the people of God who returned from exile and rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple. See **Jerusalem**.

justify, justified—God’s declaring that repentant believers are pardoned of their sins; ultimately we are justified through Jesus Christ alone because of his sacrifice for our sin.

kingdom of heaven, kingdom of God—the rule of God over all his creation, especially evident in the lives of his people, who follow the teachings of Jesus and believe in him as Savior. Jesus’ central

message was the good news that “the kingdom of God is near” (Mark 1:15). This is good news because it shows that God loves us and wants us to live with him forever. (See also **good news**.) The Bible teaches that God comes to live with us (Gen. 3:8; Ex. 33:7-11; 40:34-38; John 1:14; Rev. 21:1-4), so the kingdom of heaven is not some faraway place but is with us wherever God makes his dwelling among us—in our hearts and in the community of believers, the people of God. Though the kingdom will not come fully until the end of time (Matt. 24-25; 1 Cor. 15:20-28; 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11; Rev. 21-22), it *is coming* now, and we see evidence of that in the ways we change to live for God and the ways we can work to do good in this world, following the example of Jesus.

the law—refers to the body of Old Testament writings prescribing the law that God gave to the Israelites for daily living, summed up in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20; see also Matt. 22:37-40).

Levite—a descendant of the tribe of Levi among the people of Israel. The Levites were assigned by God to be priests, to care for the house of God (the temple), to attend to the details of worship, and to teach the Israelites (Jews) the ways of God.

Messiah—the promised deliverer of God’s people. Both the Hebrew word *Messiah* and the Greek word *Christ* mean “Anointed One.” Through the Old Testament prophets God promised to send the Messiah to deliver God’s people from evil oppressors and to rule them in righteousness forever. The people misunderstood these promises, however, and looked for a Messiah who would be a political ruler and gather an army to rout all their physical enemies. But as Jesus revealed through his work and teaching, the Messiah came to save God’s people from the oppression of sin and death and to give them new life forever with God. He rules today in heaven at the right hand of the Father, and when he comes again at the end of time he will fully establish God’s everlasting kingdom of righteousness on earth. (See Matt. 26:63-64; John 16:5-16; 1 Cor. 15; Rev. 21:1-5; 22:1-5.)

parable—a brief *parabolic story* that uses “out of round” (or “out of the box”) images to get a point across. The word *parable* is based on *parabola* (from *para* + *ballein*, to throw [as a ball]; for example, when you throw a ball, the line it traces in the air is a parabola). Jesus often taught in parables to challenge people with the striking, memorable truths about life in the kingdom of God.

Pharisees—an elite group of Jewish teachers and ruling elders that emphasized precise obedience to scriptural and traditional law.

priest—an official who served in the temple and belonged to the tribe of Levi. See **Levite**.

righteous—the condition of being right with God; righteousness has to do with right relationships, with responding to God and others in ways that are just. As God’s people, we are called to be righteous, and we are made right with God through faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:21-26).

Sabbath—the seventh day of the week, set apart as a day of rest and worship according to the law of Moses. Jewish religious leaders developed a stringent code of rules for keeping the Sabbath, and Jesus criticized them for being too legalistic and misunderstanding God’s intentions for peace and fulfillment on the Sabbath (see Mark 2:23-3:6; Luke 13:10-17; John 5:16-17; 7:21-24).

Samaritan—a resident of Samaria who descended from the ten northern tribes of Israel, which split away from the other tribes after the rule of King Solomon (see **Jerusalem**). The Samaritans had intermarried with other peoples in the region and claimed that God was to be worshiped in their land (at Mount Gerizim—see Deut. 11:29; 27:12; John 4:19-26), not in Jerusalem. They despised the Jews (who descended mainly from the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin), and the Jews despised them.

sin—disobedience to God; refers to breaking God’s law (1 John 3:4).

Son of God—this title for Jesus describes his relationship with God the Father as part of the Trinity. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are three persons in one being.

Son of Man—Jesus used this term to describe his humanity as well as to refer to a title associated with the Messiah as described by the prophet Daniel (see Dan. 7:13-14; Matt. 24:30; 25:31; 26:64).

tax collector—a local citizen employed to collect taxes for the Roman Empire; tax collectors were generally despised as traitors by their fellow Jews. They also commonly charged high fees so that they could get rich at everyone else’s expense (see Luke 19:1-10).

temple—In the Jewish religion there was only one temple—the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem—where God-fearing believers from all nations came to worship (see Acts 2:1, 5). For example, each year during the Feast of Passover, Jewish men were required to travel to the temple in Jerusalem to join in the festivities and temple sacrifices (see John 2:13-14; 11:55). During the rest of the year, except at other feast times, most Jews worshiped God in their local synagogues. The temple in Jerusalem stood on a hilltop (Mount Zion) and was visible for miles around.

Word (of God)—the true and living message of God (Heb. 4:12); in the Bible this term refers (1) to God’s spoken word in creation (Gen. 1) and through prophets and teachers; (2) to God’s written Word, the Scriptures (Matt. 5:17; 2 Tim. 3:14-17); and (3) to Jesus Christ as the Word of God who “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

Lesson 1

Matthew 13:1-52

Why Did Jesus Teach in Parables?

Introductory Notes

The Bible shows that Jesus used parables whenever he spoke to crowds, teaching people about the kingdom of God. Some of Jesus' parables were very short—some were even one-liners—and others were more like compacted short stories. But each one had an important message.

To begin this study, we're going to look at Matthew 13, which includes seven of Jesus' parables. We won't be able to cover each one in detail, but as we look through them, we'll discover common themes and patterns that help us understand what parables are and why Jesus used them.

Several of the parables in Matthew 13 are very brief, and we'll begin by looking at the shorter ones in the middle of the chapter. These help us to identify some of the main features and techniques in Jesus' parables. Then we'll go back to study a longer one (the parable of the sower—13:1-23) in some detail. After that, if there's enough time in your session, you may want to look briefly at the parable of the weeds (13:24-30, 36-43) and the parable of the net (13:47-50), which are very much alike.

Optional Share Question

Note: The optional share question in each lesson may serve well at the beginning of your session or at some other time during your discussion. Use or adapt share questions in a way that works best for your group.

Use some questions like these to help group members focus and to gain a sense of their experience with Jesus' parables:

- **Have you heard some of Jesus' parables before? If so, what's your impression of them?**
- **Why do you think Jesus used parables to teach about the kingdom of heaven?**

1. Matthew 13:31-35

- a. *What pictures does Jesus use here to describe the kingdom of heaven?*

- **What’s remarkable about the mustard seed?**
- **What insight does this picture give about the kingdom of heaven?**
- **What do we learn about God’s kingdom from the picture of the tree that grows?**
- **What does the picture of yeast reveal about the kingdom?**

Invite group members to respond after reading carefully through these Scripture verses. If these parables are familiar to your group, ask everyone to look carefully at the text for details they might not have noticed before.

Be sure also to give people enough time to respond. Don’t feel the discussion is going poorly if you have thirty seconds of silence during a response time. That sometimes helps quieter members build up the courage to participate.

As leader, you may want to share some of the following comments if people haven’t mentioned them:

Jesus notes that although a mustard seed is tiny and may look insignificant, it grows into “the largest of garden plants.” And not only does it grow larger than we might expect; it also becomes a resting place and refuge for God’s creatures.

Though yeast may seem insignificant, any baker knows it can be worked effectively throughout a batch of dough to yield a wonderful loaf of bread.

b. Why do you think Jesus spoke in parables?

- **What do you think Jesus means by “things hidden since the creation of the world”?**

At this point, invite group members simply to reflect and share their thoughts about the statements in verses 34 and 35. No one should be concerned about giving a “correct” answer. After a brief time of reflection and sharing, note that they’ll be coming back to this question later in the lesson, after hearing Jesus explain why he spoke in parables.

Then move on to examine a couple of other short parables.

2. Matthew 13:44-46

a. What do these two parables say about the kingdom of heaven?

- **Why would Jesus say the kingdom is like hidden treasure?**

- **What do you think of the actions of the person who found the treasure?**
 - **Why would Jesus say the kingdom is like a pearl of great value?**
 - **What does the merchant do, and why?**
- b. *Reflect on these and the other parables you've looked at so far. In what ways are they all alike?*
- c. *Why do you think Jesus uses so many different pictures to describe the kingdom of God?*

Group members are probably beginning to notice that even short parables are not necessarily easy to understand. The truth in them is not always obvious, and they can include an element of surprise. Like the first two short parables we looked at, these parables use metaphors (“The kingdom of heaven is like . . .”).

Metaphors

In *The Kingdom Equation*, a carefully researched study on parables, John Timmer points out that metaphors help us see things that can't be described *directly*. Some things, like the kingdom of heaven, are so different from our experience that they can only be described *indirectly*. Metaphors help us describe things that way. Metaphors are word pictures that use symbols and analogies to help us understand new things in terms of things that are familiar to us.

An illustration from Augustine (A.D. 354-430) might help. For example, you could ask group members,

- **Have you ever tried to explain the concept of *time* to someone?**

Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*, “I know what [time] is if no one asks me what it is. But if I want to explain it to someone who has asked me, I find that I do not know.” The concept of time can only be explained *indirectly*. We can only begin to describe it by saying what it means to us and how it functions in our lives.

Also think together about the Bible's descriptions of God. God is completely *other* from us (see Isa. 40:10-31; 45:18-25). God is our creator; we are his creatures. God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and present everywhere; we are vastly limited in our knowledge, strength, and will, and we are limited to the space in which we can move in our physical bodies.

How then can we describe God, except in ways that are familiar and make sense to us? Here are a couple of questions that can help group members think through this together:

- **Think about word pictures and names we often use to describe God. Where do most of these come from?**
- **Just for fun, how many names and pictures of God can you list in about 15 seconds? Do any of these fully describe God? Explain.**

Some of the many names for God that we find in the Bible are Creator, Lord, Sovereign, King, Father, and Judge. Some of the many biblical word pictures that describe God are shepherd, farmer, gardener, shelter, rock, hen, and even “lion [that] growls . . . over his prey” and “birds hovering overhead” (Isa. 31:4-5). We can never claim to understand or describe God fully; we can only begin to describe God with pictures familiar to us.

Note together that Jesus uses word pictures (metaphors) in his parables in much the same way—to describe God and the kingdom of God.

- d. *When you think of God’s kingdom, what pictures come to mind? Do these line up with things you’ve already learned from Jesus’ parables (or may know from other well-known parables)? Explain.*

As Jesus himself said, the kingdom of God is “not of this world” (John 18:36), and yet the kingdom *is coming into* this world (Matt. 6:10; Mark 1:15). And because God’s kingdom is so completely different, even upside down, from the experience we have in this world, Jesus often uses parables (story metaphors) to teach about this amazing kingdom.

The word *parable* is sort of shorthand for *parabolic story*, a brief story that uses “out of round” (or “out of the box”) images to get a point across. It may help group members to think of this in terms of a parabola in mathematics, or of a line traced in the air when you throw a ball (see glossary).

In later lessons we’ll focus more on the upside-down, unexpected character of God’s kingdom, but for now you can touch on this briefly by noting that in God’s kingdom “the first will be last” and the proud and powerful will be humbled in comparison to those who are considered lesser or weak (see Matt. 5:1-12; 19:28-20:16; Luke 1:51-53). As Jesus often points out, the kingdom of God comes in ways that we don’t expect (Matt. 24:44; John 3:1-8). Our expectations are often mixed up because we think and act according to the ways of this world (see 1 Cor. 1:18-25).

As you and your group ponder these things, you might also take the opportunity to say that all this is actually tied to the good news Jesus has come to share—that the kingdom of God is coming to make this broken world (and everything in it, including us!) whole again (see Ps. 24:1; Matt. 6:10; Mark 1:15).

During this discussion, if you sense that any group members are drawing closer to a commitment or recommitment to faith in God, offer a general invitation to talk later with people who have questions about the good news or about coming to faith. Make use of “An Invitation” and the “Prayer of Commitment” (at the back of this guide and/or the study guide), if you like, to help someone receive Jesus.

Surprise, Shock

Before moving on to the parable of the sower, there’s another important point you may need to mention—especially if people haven’t noticed it already. Many of Jesus’ parables include metaphors that *surprise* or even *shock* us. As John Timmer puts it, “A good metaphor shocks. It brings together ideas that have never been brought together before.” Such a metaphor upsets conventional language and thinking in a way that makes it memorable.

We all use metaphors every day, and most of them have become so familiar that we don’t notice the shock or surprise they likely gave their original hearers. Use a couple of questions like these to reflect on some common metaphors in our everyday living:

- **Can you think of some everyday metaphors that really are not natural word pictures but introduce some surprise or shock to our thinking?**
- **If you’re “running stuck,” think about “the eye of a needle,” “the mouth of a river,” or “the neck of a bottle.” Or how about “spur of the moment” and “nick of time” or “pave the way” and “run for office”? Often we describe things in terms of physical things and actions we are familiar with. What are some other everyday metaphors we use?**

We can see how these metaphors can be surprising and then become memorable after people first hear them. The fact that we use many of them still today shows how memorable and effective they are.

Many of the metaphors Jesus used in his parables yield the same results. People remember Jesus’ stories and their teaching because he introduces something shocking (the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God) into those stories.

In light of all this, one of our tasks in this study will be to unearth the surprising or shocking elements of Jesus’ parables so that we can see anew the fresh teaching of the kingdom of heaven breaking into this world.

- e. *When looking at the short parables in Matthew 13:44-46, did you notice anything shocking or at least unexpected? Explain.*

- **Why would Jesus talk about someone who used deception to hide and then regain the treasure he had found? Would that be fair to the owner, who didn't know the treasure was there? How could the kingdom of heaven be like that?**
- **Why would Jesus tell about a merchant who sold everything he had in order to buy one valuable pearl? What kind of businessperson would do something like that?**

Invite group members to think hard about these questions and to wrestle with God over them. We all need to ask ourselves,

- **What is Jesus teaching here about the kingdom of heaven?**

You may need to note that while Jesus is not condoning deception or foolish business practices (which would go against other teachings in the Bible), he is inviting us to take a fresh look at the kingdom of heaven. Ask group members to think further, for example, along these lines:

- **What might Jesus be teaching us about the value of the kingdom of heaven and how we show that in our lives?**
- **Do we mark the kingdom of heaven with the same value we would place on a priceless treasure, or on a magnificent pearl?**
- **In other words, is the kingdom of heaven the most valuable treasure in our lives? If so, how do we show that in our everyday living?**

With these things in mind, let's see what Jesus has to say in his parable of the sower.

3. *Matthew 13:1-9*

- Describe the setting and the crowd in which Jesus tells this parable.*
 - What does Jesus teach in this parable? What do you think this is saying about God and his kingdom?*
- **Who are the characters in the parable?**
 - **What happens to the seed in different kinds of soil?**

Focus first on just the parable and the setting in which Jesus tells it. If group members are familiar with this story, urge them to look for

details and developments they may not have noticed before. Also give newcomers a chance to share their thoughts before others who may have studied this parable in the past. Again, no one should be concerned about giving a “correct” answer. Encourage discovery and creative reflection in line with Jesus’ comment about *having ears to hear* what he is saying to us.

4. *Matthew 13:10-17*

- a. *What do Jesus’ disciples ask him after he tells this parable, and how does Jesus respond?*
- b. *What does Jesus mean here?*

When the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks in parables, we hear a response that may puzzle us. Jesus begins speaking of “the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven” (13:11), and this knowledge appears to be a gift as well as a key to understanding about Jesus’ teaching.

If group members seem confused or a bit distrustful at this point, assure them that Jesus is not trying to confuse us. He’s simply telling us bluntly that we need to be willing to receive his teaching if we really want to learn from it. In other words, if our hearts are not open to receiving him, if our minds are instead clouded by the distractions and worries of this world, we will not understand his teaching and it will fall on deaf ears or “go right over our heads.”

Note together what Jesus says in Matthew 13:15. Group members will see that Jesus is talking about people who either close their eyes and hearts to his message or open themselves to hear and understand. Those who are open know that they need to be healed, so they turn to God (repent) and receive the healing they need in their souls. Note also that Jesus is revealing that he is the healer.

In verses 16-17 Jesus assures his disciples that they are blessed because they see and hear him, the One whom many prophets and righteous people longed to see in their lifetime. For another perspective on prophets and righteous people who remained faithful even though they didn’t see God’s promises fulfilled, see Hebrews 11:13, 32-40.

We might still be puzzled, though, because it seems Jesus is intentionally hiding some of the meaning of his parables. Assure your group again that Jesus is not hiding anything from anyone who is open to hearing him and learning about the kingdom of heaven. In this regard, a note on Luke 8:4 (where the same parable is told) from the *NIV Study Bible* may be helpful:

Although parables clarified Jesus’ teaching, they also included hidden meanings needing further explanation. These hidden

meanings challenged the sincerely interested to further inquiry, and taught truths that Jesus wanted to conceal from unbelievers. . . . From parables Jesus' enemies could find no direct statements to use against him.

If necessary, explain that Jesus had to be wary of enemies who were plotting to kill him (Matt. 12:14). These people and others who had hardened their hearts against him could not make sense of his parables. But anyone who truly wanted to learn from Jesus could learn more from "further inquiry."

5. *Matthew 13:18-23*

What does Jesus teach as he explains the parable of the sower to his disciples?

- **Compare Jesus' explanation to your earlier interpretation of the parable.**

As some group members may have discerned already, the seed is the Word of God that goes out into the world. It falls on different types of soil, which represent different types of listeners. Some soil is totally unyielding and unproductive (along the path). Some soil is rocky and shallow, so it can't withstand challenges to nurturing the seed. Some soil is thorny and full of weeds that cause distractions and choke the Word from being fruitful. And some soil is good and productive, yielding an abundant harvest for the kingdom of God.

At this point, you could also look together briefly at Mark 4 and Luke 8, which relate the same parable in slightly different wording. (Jesus may have taught this parable more than once and in different settings.) As you do so, you could add that in Mark 4:13 Jesus says to his disciples, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"

Jesus apparently wanted to make clear that the parable of the sower was one of the most important for understanding his teaching on the kingdom of God. As scholars have noted, it soon becomes clear that Jesus taught the parable of the sower as a picture of his own life and mission.

To help group members discover this for themselves, you could ask,

- **When Jesus talks about the farmer who goes out to sow seed, whom might he be referring to?**

The farmer who sows the seed, of course, is Jesus—and, by extension, this figure also represents Jesus' disciples, including us today.

Next invite group members to try to see what Jesus is saying to each of them personally. Ask some questions like the following, inviting everyone to reflect silently. You could also invite sharing within the group if people are comfortable doing so.

- **Which type of soil describes you?**
- **At another time in your life, did you respond like another type of soil? Explain.**

If any group members are concerned that their faith may be too weak and they could fall away or be snatched away by the devil, assure them that their concern already shows they are open and receptive to God's Word. In other words, they are already counted as good soil. You could mention also that Jesus' closest disciples, whom he described as good soil (Matt. 13:16; Mark 10:28-30), sometimes fell and failed him, but in the end (except for Judas, who went his own way) they were faithful and helped God produce an abundant crop (see also Matt. 9:37-38).

Note: If your session time is running out, you may want to skip over the next set of questions and wrap up with the Questions for Reflection at the end of the lesson. You could encourage group members to read and ponder the parable of the weeds and the parable of the net at home.

6. Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-52

- What happens in the parable of the weeds and the parable of the net? How are these parables similar to the parable of the sower?*
- **What elements in these parables are similar to those in the parable of the sower? What elements are different?**
- What does Jesus teach about the kingdom in these parables? What shocking truth does Jesus teach here?*

The parable of the weeds and the parable of the net are sometimes called judgment parables. They are similar to each other in that both involve a separating (by angels) of wicked people from righteous people at the end of time. The wicked are thrown into "the fiery furnace" (13:42, 50—usually interpreted as hell, or eternal separation from God), and the righteous (who live by the teachings of the kingdom) enjoy eternal life with God.

The parable of the weeds shares some similarities with the parable of the sower: a farmer, the sowing of seed, weeds that grow among good

plants, and so on. One noticeable difference is that in the parable of the weeds the good plants are not choked out by the weeds (or thorns).

Another similarity between the parable of the sower and the parable of the weeds is that Jesus interprets both of them for his disciples. These are among just a few parables in Scripture that Jesus explains in detail to his disciples. (See also Matt. 15:15-20.)

The metaphors of sowing seed and casting a net are similar in that they aim for gathering a harvest or drawing in a great catch for the kingdom of heaven. The good news in all of Jesus' parables is that God wants people to come into his kingdom to enjoy life "to the full" (John 10:10). That has always been God's intention.

The shocking, sobering reality in these judgment parables, however, is that some people reject God's offer of full life by closing their hearts to Jesus' message. This is a hard teaching, and it gives us pause. While Jesus doesn't want us to be terrified (that's why he offers the good news of the kingdom to everyone); he also doesn't want us to become complacent and lazy or unproductive for the kingdom of God.

- **What new treasures do you think Jesus is talking about in Matthew 13:52?**

Like a treasure that's been hidden for ages and is rediscovered (13:44), like a jewel more valuable than anything else in life (13:46), the coming of the kingdom is good news. It may take some effort to think through what is *new* here in the message of Jesus. Several aspects of Jesus' teachings on the kingdom are new, but by the end of your discussion everyone should be aware that *Jesus himself* is the greatest new thing (news) this world has ever seen. Jesus and everything that comes with him is treasure beyond our imagining. As Colossians 2:2-3 puts it, "the full riches of complete understanding" are in knowing "the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

As Jesus stated clearly, new life in the kingdom of heaven is available through him (John 14:6). Jesus came to live a perfect life and to die in our place so that, by believing in him, we can be forgiven and reconciled with God to live forever with him (see John 3:16; Acts 16:31; Rom. 5:5-11; Heb. 2:17-18; 4:15-16). Reflect with your group on these kingdom teachings as treasures (precious truths) that enrich our lives "to the full" (John 10:10).

Questions for Reflection

What have you learned in this lesson about Jesus' parables?

How would you now explain to someone else what Jesus teaches in his parables? What examples would you give from the parables covered in this lesson?

Discover Your Bible Series

Discover
**THE PARABLES
OF JESUS**



STUDY GUIDE

STUDY GUIDE

Discover
**THE PARABLES
OF JESUS**



by
Paul Faber


**FAITH
ALIVE**
Christian Resources

Grand Rapids, Michigan

The writer of this study is grateful for the helpful insights and research of John Timmer in his book *The Kingdom Equation: A Fresh Look at the Parables of Jesus* (Faith Alive, 2008, Second Edition), from which portions of the lesson material derive.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in this publication are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION, © 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Cover photo: Getty

Discover Your Bible series. *Discover the Parables of Jesus* (Study Guide), © 2008 by Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560. All rights reserved. With the exception of brief excerpts for review purposes, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher. Printed in the United States of America.

We welcome your comments. Call us at 1-800-333-8300 or e-mail us at editors@faithaliveresources.org.

ISBN 978-1-59255-455-3

5 4 3 2 1

Contents

How to Study	4
Introduction	5
Glossary of Terms.....	6
Lesson 1	
Why Did Jesus Teach in Parables?.....	9
Lesson 2	
The Great Banquet	14
Lesson 3	
The Merciful Samaritan.....	18
Lesson 4	
“There Was a Man Who Had Two Sons . . .”	22
Lesson 5	
The Dishonest Manager	27
Lesson 6	
The Respectable Citizen and the Despicable Sinner	31
An Invitation and Prayer of Commitment	35
Bibliography	37
Evaluation Questionnaire	

How to Study

The questions in this study booklet will help you discover for yourself what the Bible says. This is inductive Bible study--in which you will discover the message for yourself.

Questions are the key to inductive Bible study. Through questions you search for the writers' thoughts and ideas. The questions in this booklet are designed to help you in your quest for answers. You can and should ask your own questions too. The Bible comes alive with meaning for many people as they discover the exciting truths it contains. Our hope and prayer is that this booklet will help the Bible come alive for you.

The questions in this study are designed to be used with the New International Version of the Bible, but other translations can also be used.

Step 1. Read each Bible passage several times. Allow the ideas to sink in. Think about their meaning. Ask questions about the passage.

Step 2. Answer the questions, drawing your answers from the passage. Remember that the purpose of the study is to discover what the Bible says. Write your answers in your own words. If you use Bible study aids such as commentaries or Bible handbooks, do so only after completing your own personal study.

Step 3. Apply the Bible's message to your own life. Ask,

- What is this passage saying to me?
- How does it challenge me? Comfort me? Encourage me?
- Is there a promise I should claim? A warning I should heed?
- For what can I give thanks?

If you sense God speaking to you in some way, respond to God in a personal prayer.

Step 4. Share your thoughts with someone else if possible. This will be easiest if you are part of a Bible study group that meets regularly to share discoveries and discuss questions.

If you would like to learn of a study group in your area or would like information on training to start a small group Bible study,

- call toll-free 1-888-644-0814, e-mail smallgroups@crcna.org, or visit www.FaithAliveResources.org/DYB

Introduction

Anyone who came to listen to Jesus soon learned that he was a storyteller. Jesus told stories that would stay with you. He'd often use simple, everyday characters and situations—and yet he'd add some unusual twist that was hard to forget. It might make you shake your head, but you couldn't shake the truth of it.

Sometimes the story would weigh heavily on you. It might even make you want to change the way you lived.

That was the point.

When Jesus came to live and teach among us, he came not just to tell stories. He came to tell us and show us (through his entire life) about the kingdom of God. Everywhere he went, the main point of Jesus' message was "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). Then he would often say, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like . . . ?" (4:30), and he would tell a *parabolic story* (parable) to teach something crucial about God's kingdom.

Jesus often also healed people of their ailments and diseases. Sometimes he even brought people back from death to life!

In all these ways Jesus showed people just how near the kingdom of God was and that *it is coming*—into our world, into our lives, into our heads and hearts.

Jesus is no ordinary teacher, and his parables are no ordinary stories. Let's listen to a few in this brief study. Let's see what Jesus wants to show and tell us about the kingdom of God.

Glossary of Terms

angels—supernatural beings created by God to be messengers, to carry out God’s will in this world, and to serve and care for all who belong to God (Ps. 91:11-12).

the devil—also called Satan (which means “accuser”—see Zech. 3:1); this term refers to the fallen angel who tempted humanity to sin and wants to destroy God’s kingdom. The Bible refers to this being as “the evil one” (Matt. 6:13; 13:19); “a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8); “the great dragon . . . that ancient serpent called the devil, Satan, who leads the whole world astray” (Rev. 12:9; see Gen. 3); and more. When Jesus conquered sin and death for our sake, he dealt Satan a fatal blow (see Gen. 3:14-15) and destroyed his power to accuse us of our sins before God (Col. 2:13-15). At the end of time, Jesus will completely defeat Satan (Rev. 20:7-10). Though Satan is still powerful today, he cannot snatch us from God’s hand (John 10:27-30).

dropsy—also called edema, a medical condition resulting in swelling from a fluid buildup in connective tissue (tendons and ligaments).

evil one—see **devil**

good news—this term (same as the word *gospel*) refers to the Bible’s central message of salvation from sin through Jesus Christ to eternal life in the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15; John 3:16; Rom. 1:16-17).

Isaiah—one of the major prophets of Israel. Isaiah prophesied from 740-681 B.C. and delivered a number of clear prophecies about the Messiah of Israel (Jesus Christ).

Israel—this name commonly refers to God’s chosen people, the descendants of Jacob (whom God renamed Israel—Gen. 32:28).

Jericho—formerly an ancient Canaanite city that was destroyed when the Lord first led the Israelites into the promised land (Josh. 6).

Jerusalem—This ancient city became the capital of the Old Testament kingdom of Israel; King Solomon built the temple of the Lord there. After the kingdom of Israel was divided and the people were later exiled and then freed to return, the city and temple were rebuilt.

Jews—the people of God who returned from exile and rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple. See **Jerusalem**.

justify, justified—God’s declaring that repentant believers are pardoned of their sins; ultimately we are justified through Jesus Christ alone because of his sacrifice for our sin.

kingdom of heaven, kingdom of God—the rule of God over all his creation, especially evident in the lives of his people, who follow the teachings of Jesus and believe in him as Savior. Jesus’ central

message was the good news that “the kingdom of God is near” (Mark 1:15). This is good news because it shows that God loves us and wants us to live with him forever. (See also **good news**.) The Bible teaches that God comes to live with us (Gen. 3:8; Ex. 33:7-11; 40:34-38; John 1:14; Rev. 21:1-4), so the kingdom of heaven is not some faraway place but is with us wherever God makes his dwelling among us—in our hearts and in the community of believers, the people of God. Though the kingdom will not come fully until the end of time (Matt. 24-25; 1 Cor. 15:20-28; 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11; Rev. 21-22), it *is coming* now, and we see evidence of that in the ways we change to live for God and the ways we can work to do good in this world, following the example of Jesus.

the law—refers to the body of Old Testament writings prescribing the law that God gave to the Israelites for daily living, summed up in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20; see also Matt. 22:37-40).

Levite—a descendant of the tribe of Levi among the people of Israel. The Levites were assigned by God to be priests, to care for the house of God (the temple), to attend to the details of worship, and to teach the Israelites (Jews) the ways of God.

Messiah—the promised deliverer of God’s people. Both the Hebrew word *Messiah* and the Greek word *Christ* mean “Anointed One.” Through the Old Testament prophets God promised to send the Messiah to deliver God’s people from evil oppressors and to rule them in righteousness forever. The people misunderstood these promises, however, and looked for a Messiah who would be a political ruler and gather an army to rout all their physical enemies. But as Jesus revealed through his work and teaching, the Messiah came to save God’s people from the oppression of sin and death and to give them new life forever with God. He rules today in heaven at the right hand of the Father, and when he comes again at the end of time he will fully establish God’s everlasting kingdom of righteousness on earth. (See Matt. 26:63-64; John 16:5-16; 1 Cor. 15; Rev. 21:1-5; 22:1-5.)

parable—a brief *parabolic story* that uses “out of round” (or “out of the box”) images to get a point across. The word *parable* is based on *parabola* (from *para* + *ballein*, to throw [as a ball]; for example, when you throw a ball, the line it traces in the air is a parabola). Jesus often taught in parables to challenge people with the striking, memorable truths about life in the kingdom of God.

Pharisees—an elite group of Jewish teachers and ruling elders that emphasized precise obedience to scriptural and traditional law.

priest—an official who served in the temple and belonged to the tribe of Levi. See **Levite**.

righteous—the condition of being right with God; righteousness has to do with right relationships, with responding to God and others in ways that are just. As God’s people, we are called to be righteous, and we are made right with God through faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:21-26).

Sabbath—the seventh day of the week, set apart as a day of rest and worship according to the law of Moses. Jewish religious leaders developed a stringent code of rules for keeping the Sabbath, and Jesus criticized them for being too legalistic and misunderstanding God’s intentions for peace and fulfillment on the Sabbath (see Mark 2:23-3:6; Luke 13:10-17; John 5:16-17; 7:21-24).

Samaritan—a resident of Samaria who descended from the ten northern tribes of Israel, which split away from the other tribes after the rule of King Solomon (see **Jerusalem**). The Samaritans had intermarried with other peoples in the region and claimed that God was to be worshiped in their land (at Mount Gerizim—see Deut. 11:29; 27:12; John 4:19-26), not in Jerusalem. They despised the Jews (who descended mainly from the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin), and the Jews despised them.

sin—disobedience to God; refers to breaking God’s law (1 John 3:4).

Son of God—this title for Jesus describes his relationship with God the Father as part of the Trinity. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are three persons in one being.

Son of Man—Jesus used this term to describe his humanity as well as to refer to a title associated with the Messiah as described by the prophet Daniel (see Dan. 7:13-14; Matt. 24:30; 25:31; 26:64).

tax collector—a local citizen employed to collect taxes for the Roman Empire; tax collectors were generally despised as traitors by their fellow Jews. They also commonly charged high fees so that they could get rich at everyone else’s expense (see Luke 19:1-10).

temple—In the Jewish religion there was only one temple—the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem—where God-fearing believers from all nations came to worship (see Acts 2:1, 5). For example, each year during the Feast of Passover, Jewish men were required to travel to the temple in Jerusalem to join in the festivities and temple sacrifices (see John 2:13-14; 11:55). During the rest of the year, except at other feast times, most Jews worshiped God in their local synagogues. The temple in Jerusalem stood on a hilltop (Mount Zion) and was visible for miles around.

Word (of God)—the true and living message of God (Heb. 4:12); in the Bible this term refers (1) to God’s spoken word in creation (Gen. 1) and through prophets and teachers; (2) to God’s written Word, the Scriptures (Matt. 5:17; 2 Tim. 3:14-17); and (3) to Jesus Christ as the Word of God who “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

Lesson 1

Matthew 13:1-52

Why Did Jesus Teach in Parables?

Introductory Notes

The Bible shows that Jesus used parables whenever he spoke to crowds, teaching people about the kingdom of God. Some of Jesus' parables were very short—some were even one-liners—and others were more like compacted short stories. But each one had an important message.

To begin this study, we're going to look at Matthew 13, which includes seven of Jesus' parables. We won't be able to cover each one in detail, but as we look through them, we'll discover common themes and patterns that help us understand what parables are and why Jesus used them.

Several of the parables in Matthew 13 are very brief, and we'll begin by looking at the shorter ones in the middle of the chapter. These help us to identify some of the main features and techniques in Jesus' parables. Then we'll go back to study a longer one (the parable of the sower—13:1-23) in some detail. After that, if there's enough time in your session, you may want to look briefly at the parable of the weeds (13:24-30, 36-43) and the parable of the net (13:47-50), which are very much alike.

1. *Matthew 13:31-35*

- a. What pictures does Jesus use here to describe the kingdom of heaven?

- b. Why do you think Jesus spoke in parables?

5. *Matthew 13:18-23*

What does Jesus teach as he explains the parable of the sower to his disciples?

6. *Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-52*

a. What happens in the parable of the weeds and the parable of the net? How are these parables similar to the parable of the sower?

b. What does Jesus teach about the kingdom in these parables? What shocking truth does Jesus teach here?

Questions for Reflection

What have you learned in this lesson about Jesus' parables?

How would you now explain to someone else what Jesus teaches in his parables? What examples would you give from the parables covered in this lesson?