



**Christian Reflection**  
A Series in Faith and Ethics

**Christian Reflection**  
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## Study Guides for

# Parables

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to help us explore how Jesus' parables lead us to know God's love and loving demands on our lives. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

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Jesus' parables were created and preserved in conversation with both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural environments, and they partake, vigorously at times, in those cultural dialogues. As we become more aware of these diverse webs of meaning, we can respond more fully to the message of the one who spoke parables with one ear already listening for our responses.

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What would it mean to hear Jesus' parables in their final literary form in the Greco-Roman world? Perhaps we too hastily have stripped away the allegorizing of the early and medieval church as secondary embellishments that lead us away from the "original" message of Jesus.

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Jesus' parables cannot be understood by standing apart from them with arms folded in neutral objectivity. They can only be understood by "entering" into them, allowing their stories to lay claim on us. How do we drop our guard so parables may have their intended effect?

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Clarence Jordan was an unusually able interpreter of Jesus' parables. Not only his academic study, but also his small-town background and experiences in establishing the interracial Koinonia Farm in the 1940s shaped his ability to hear the parables in "the Cotton Patch."



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### Focus Article:

- 📖 The Contexts of Jesus' Parables  
(*Parables*, pp. 11-18)

### Suggested Article:

- 📖 Interpreting the Parables' Recent Interpreters  
(*Parables*, pp. 88-93)

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# The Contexts of Jesus' Parables

Jesus' parables were created and preserved in conversation with both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural environments, and they partake, vigorously at times, in those cultural dialogues. As we become more aware of these diverse webs of meaning, we can respond more fully to the message of the one who spoke parables with one ear already listening for our responses.

### Prayer

God of light and not of darkness,  
we thank you that in times past you spoke to your people  
and led them through a wilderness.  
Shed light on our path and lead us by your Spirit,  
for without your guidance  
we will surely lose our way.  
Bless now the hearing of the parables.  
Give us ears to hear,  
and hearts to respond.  
Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Luke 16:19-31

### Reflection

We should not underestimate the originality of Jesus' parables, David Gowler points out. They have no exact parallels in ancient literature. Yet Jesus did not speak them, and the Gospel writers did not record them, in a cultural vacuum. In his stories we can see both Jewish and Greco-Roman elements.

To illustrate Gowler's point, consider the structure and content of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. (In the companion study guide, "Hazmats or Good Gifts?" we will more fully discuss Jesus' teachings on wealth and possessions in this parable.) The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

- ▶ *is like some Old Testament 'parables.'* The Septuagint, the Greek translation of Scripture in Jesus' day, uses *parabolê* (literally: "throwing alongside") to translate *mashal*, a more general Hebrew term for an action or saying that draws a comparison. A *mashal* might be a proverbial saying, byword, prophetic figurative oracle, song of derision or taunting, teaching poem, wise saying of the "intellectual elite" (as is Proverbs), or an allegorical fable. Nathan's *mashal* of the Poor Man's Only Lamb (2 Samuel 12:1-4) is the closest Old Testament parallel to Jesus' narrative parables. Just as Nathan sidesteps David's defenses to reveal the moral horror of his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, so Jesus leads us to acknowledge the darkness in ourselves. Luke's artful collage in chapter 16 opens the possibility that with this parable Jesus addresses not only "the Pharisees, who were lovers of money" (16:14), but also "his disciples" (16:1).
- ▶ *may share "a common narrative tradition" with parables in medieval rabbinic literature.* "The rabbis commonly used parables to deliver sermons in synagogues and study the Torah in the academies," notes Gowler. "In fact, they became convinced that the parable form itself was created for studying the Torah." Because we do



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not know the original contexts of rabbinic parables, it is difficult to connect them with Jesus' stories. Since the rabbinic parables were used to explain Scripture, they tend to be more formulaic and "exceed the Gospel parables in the degree of their explicit interpretation."

- ▶ *is like a Greek fable*, in that it is an invented story that (1) sheds light on aspects of human experience, (2) involves ordinary human characters, (3) illustrates a religious and ethical theme, and (4) has an ironic reversal. Unlike most fables, it does not have a "moral" attached. Elsewhere, "Matthew and Luke tend to add such moralizing features either to the beginning of a parable (Luke 18:1) or the end (Matthew 18:35)."
- ▶ *reflects the worldview of first-century peasants*. Peasants, who submitted in deference to wealthy patrons in return for their support, would assume the rich man in this parable "is evil and deserving of punishment," Gowler suggests. "Peasants envisioned the patronage relationship as a moral obligation of the wealthy — that is, rich people had a moral responsibility to help those who were less fortunate (cf. Deuteronomy 15:7–11). Since the rich man in Jesus' parable does not live up to this obligation, peasants would conclude that he amply deserves the punishment he receives."

Thus, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus "partakes in the broader arena of the cultural life of ancient Mediterranean society," Gowler concludes. "If we compare Jesus' parables *only* to other Jewish literature, we ignore the cultural contexts in which this parable was created, told, and heard."

### Study Questions

1. Of the many parables told by Jesus, which one or two are most memorable for you? Why? Which of his parables is the most puzzling? Did you answer with the same parable(s)?
2. Do you remember any of Jesus' parables that are similar to a wise saying or proverb-type of *mashal*?
3. What insights into Jesus' parables, especially the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, can we glean by considering each of the four elements of Jewish and Greco-Roman culture that Gowler sketches?
4. Read Deuteronomy 15:7-11, which describes the attitude of heart that those with financial resources should have toward the poor in their land. How would a first-century Jewish listener, who is familiar with this instruction of Scripture, judge the behavior of the rich man in Jesus' parable?
5. After this brief review of the cultural contexts of Jesus' parables, do you think Jesus was more original in his teaching methods, or less, than you did before? Does it make a difference whether Jesus used an uncommon, or even unique, approach to teaching?

### Departing Hymn: "Christ's Parables"



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### Focus Article:

📖 Hearing a Parable with the Early Church  
(*Parables*, pp. 19-26)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Go and Do Likewise  
(*Parables*, pp. 66-70)

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# Hearing Parables with the Early Church

What would it mean to hear Jesus' parables in their final literary form in the Greco-Roman world? Perhaps we too hastily have stripped away the allegorizing of the early and medieval church as secondary embellishments that lead us away from the "original" message of Jesus.

### Prayer

Loving and merciful One, we thank you for the community in which you have placed us, for the brothers and sisters with whom we walk this pilgrim journey.

Yet, we confess that we fail to love as you love.

We push aside those whom we believe are the least in your Kingdom. We fail to see your Kingdom in parables because we fail to see your Kingdom in each other.

Form in us a new vision of community in which there is neither East nor West, neither South nor North. We pray for the sake of your Kingdom that both is and is not yet. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Luke 10:25-37

### Reflection

For centuries Christians understood Jesus' parables as allegories about God: one character in the story represented God and the events pointed variously toward our rebellion, divine judgment, or God's forgiveness. Modern scholars, however, often dismiss this approach as an uncontrollable projection by the interpreter.

While we should not "return to the kind of allegorizing that agonizingly sees a referent for every detail of the text," Mikeal Parsons asks us to reconsider the time-honored method of allegorical interpretation. Occasionally, it may "open new vistas on Jesus' parables and...[be] more sensitive to the literary and canonical contexts of the Christian Scriptures" than modern historical approaches. Parsons illustrates the value of the allegorical interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

- ▶ *The focus of the parable is the Samaritan's mercy.* Words like "half-dead," "take care of," "neighbor," and "showing mercy" signaled to Greco-Roman listeners that the Samaritan was practicing philanthropy (literally "love of humankind," cf. Acts 28:2). This ancient virtue was expressed not only by "offering greetings or hosting dinners," but also in "benevolent assistance of one who had suffered a misfortune."
- ▶ *In Luke's Gospel, only God or God's agent, Jesus, shows mercy.* Since showing compassion or mercy is "a divine prerogative and a divine action" throughout the Lukan narrative, "this is our first clue...that the Good Samaritan, when he shows compassion on the man in the ditch, is functioning figuratively as God's agent," Parsons writes. The Samaritan "functions as a Christ figure who ultimately acts as God's agent in engaging in benevolent acts of philanthropy."
- ▶ *The literary context supports an allegorical reading.* Luke weaves together four stories and parables, "two in which Christ, actually



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or figuratively, shows how properly to love neighbor and the Lord, and two in which other characters, one in the narrative proper and the other in a parable, do likewise”:

*love neighbors* (Parable of the Good Samaritan, 10:29-37) — example: Samaritan as Christ figure

*love the Lord* (Mary and Martha, 10:38-42) — example: Mary

*love the Lord* (the Lord’s Prayer, 11:1-4) — example: Jesus

*love neighbors/friends* (Parable of the Friend at Midnight, 11:5-13) — example: the friend seeking bread

Thus, “a call by Jesus to imitate the philanthropic Samaritan” becomes, in the context of Luke 10 and 11, a call “to imitate the compassion of Christ himself,” concludes Parsons.

In Luke, Samaritans are despised outsiders. Why, then, would the Lukan Jesus scandalously depict himself as a “compassionate Samaritan”? “The identification,” Parsons says, fits the “pattern of reversal in Luke’s Gospel, where the world is turned topsy-turvy: the rich and mighty are brought down and the lowly raised (1:51-52), and the kingdom disciples are called to love enemies, do good to those who hate them, and bless those who curse them (6:27-28).... Jesus defies convention. He is the Messiah who must suffer (24:46), an affront to traditional messianic expectation. He is a friend of tax collectors and sinners (7:34).”

### Study Questions

1. Why does Mikeal Parsons encourage us to use the method of allegorical interpretation? Are there dangers to allegorizing Jesus’ parables? How can we use the method carefully?
2. Comment on Parsons’ observation: “It is precisely in the use of the figure of the Samaritan as representative of Christ that the parable maintains its ‘edginess’” (*Parables*, p. 24).
3. How would you summarize what it means to love the Lord, according to Luke 10 and 11? To love your neighbor?
4. Compare how Jacopo Bassano and He Qi represent the Samaritan as a model of mercy for their contemporaries.
5. In his hymn “How Kind the Good Samaritan,” how does John Newton adopt and extend the traditional allegorical interpretation of Jesus’ parable?

### Departing Hymn: “How Kind the Good Samaritan” (verses 1, 6, and 8)

How kind the Good Samaritan  
to him who fell among the thieves!  
So Jesus pities fallen man,  
and heals the wounds the soul receives.

Unto his church my steps he led,  
the house prepared for sinners lost,  
gave charge I should be clothed and fed,  
and took upon him all the cost.

When through eternal boundless days,  
when nature’s wheel no longer rolls,  
how shall I love, adore, and praise,  
this good Samaritan to souls!

John Newton (1779), alt.

Tune: HESPERUS



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### Focus Article:

📖 Hearing Is Believing  
(*Parables*, pp. 44-50)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Mark and the Biggest Parable of All  
(*Parables*, pp. 76-80)

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# Hearing Is Believing

Jesus' parables cannot be understood by standing apart from them with arms folded in neutral objectivity. They can only be understood by "entering" into them, allowing their stories to lay claim on us. How do we drop our guard so parables may have their intended effect?

## Prayer

Scripture Reading: Mark 4:1-20, 26-34

## Meditation<sup>†</sup>

Our forbears' belief that the slow digestive process of cows was well-suited to describe the process of engaging with Scripture stands in marked contrast to the language and expectations of a fast-food generation. Their wisdom calls us to a more gentle rhythm of prayerful reading in which patience, silence and receptivity are vital ingredients. In a world of sound-bites we need to learn again the art of listening with the ear of the heart.

## Reflection

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus rarely slows down enough to teach in parables. Why would this Gospel, which frequently calls Jesus "the Teacher," so sparingly record his instruction? Mark is preparing us to *hear* Jesus' teaching, James Edwards suggests. "The teaching of Jesus is like a precious gem that requires a proper setting to accentuate it. We stand a better chance of understanding the gospel, in Mark's mind, if we first see it demonstrated. The spoken word is, of course, necessary, but as an interpretation of what Jesus does rather than as a substitute for it."

In Mark 4, Jesus underscores three parables – the Sower (4:1-9), the Growing Seed (4:26-29), and the Mustard Seed (4:30-32) – with instruction on how to *hear* the gospel. He teaches us that

- ▶ *the gospel will flourish in unexpected ways.* In the first parable, "A farmer hoping to eke out a meager harvest, at best, ends up reaping a bumper crop!" Edwards notes. "The hardpan, rocks, and thorns of the parable seem to symbolize the hard-heartedness, false hopes, and misunderstandings of Jesus' hearers.... Nor do things seem to have changed much today. We cannot help but be distressed by the self-interest and hedonism, materialism and militarism, evil and violence, cowardice and compromise that imperil the gospel and Church." Yet Jesus' story reminds us of the gospel's power "to supersede 'the facts' and do something wholly unexpected."
- ▶ *we do not determine the gospel's effect.* While the farmer works around the farm, the scattered seeds "sprout and grow" automatically. The farmer is like "a messenger or a midwife: both mediate a process, but the messenger is not the message delivered, and the midwife is not the child delivered," Edwards writes. Likewise, as we share the good news of God's kingdom, "human goodwill and intentions neither assist the gospel nor do human failures render it ineffective. We too may go to bed each night and get up each morning assured that this world belongs to God, and that God is secretly, mysteriously, and ineluctably working out his redemptive purpose in the world, despite everything to the contrary."



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- ▶ *we “enter” into the parables and receive the gospel by HEARING.* The reception of the seed in the Parable of the Sower represents ways of hearing the gospel. Why does only the fourth way bear fruit? “The Greek text gives us a very important clue,” says Edwards. “In the first three hearings the verb ‘to hear’ is in the aorist tense,” which signals “a casual hearing that fails to register, a quick and superficial hearing, ‘in one ear and out the other.’ The hearing that results in a good harvest is...in the present tense, [which] signifies an on-going, sustained activity.... The hearing that bears fruit engages the gospel, ties up with it, even wrestles with it.”
- ▶ *our understanding of Jesus’ ministry is essential for discipleship.* If we understand the Parable of the Sower, which describes Jesus’ ministry, we will understand Jesus’ teaching and call (Mark 4:13). “Mark will stress this central truth at the mid-point of his Gospel in the all-important teaching on the road to Caesarea Philippi,” Edwards writes. “Once Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah of God, then Jesus can explain to Peter and the Twelve what it means to be his disciple (Mark 8:27-38). That is to say, once Peter and the Twelve stop being mere observers but enter into the life and mission of Jesus by authentic confession, then they can begin to learn what it means to belong to Jesus and follow him as disciples. As Jesus must go to Jerusalem and die on a cross, so too must Peter and all who would follow him deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Jesus. Right confession leads to right discipleship. The cost of being the Messiah determines the cost of discipleship.”

### Study Questions

1. Why, according to James Edwards, does the Gospel of Mark record so few words of Jesus’ teaching? How does this make the Parable of the Sower even more significant?
2. Do you see the four sorts of hearing mentioned in the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower in our culture?
3. In Jesus’ parable, the farmer waits patiently for the seed to bear fruit. What are the dangers today of Christians being impatient and trying to determine the gospel’s effect?
4. “If the entire Gospel of Mark isn’t a parable, and particularly a parable about power,” Martha Sterne writes, “I don’t know what it is” (*Parables*, p. 77). According to Sterne, what does Mark teach about the nature of God’s power in Jesus Christ?
5. In Mark Moeller’s hymn “Christ’s Parables,” what does it mean for us “to hear these stories” of Jesus? How would truly *hearing* Christ’s parables change us?

### Departing Hymn: “Christ’s Parables”

† Robert Atwell, “Introduction,” *Celebrating the Seasons: Daily Spiritual Readings for the Christian Year* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2001), v.



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### Focus Article:

📖 Violent Parables and the Nonviolent Jesus  
(*Parables*, pp. 27-36)

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# Violent Parables and the Nonviolent Jesus

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount instructs us to not return violence for violence; instead, we should be like God, who offers boundless, gratuitous love to all. But in the same Gospel Jesus tells eight parables in which God deals violently with evildoers. Which of the divine ways are we to imitate?

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 13:36-43, 13:47-50, and 18:23-35

Responsive Reading: Matthew 5:43-48

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

**But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.**

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

**And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?**

**All: Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

### Reflection

Jesus teaches us to love others, even our enemies, because this is how God acts. "Just as God's offer of indiscriminate love and graciousness to the unrighteous aims to bring them into right relation, so too does that of the disciple," Barbara Reid writes. "It invites the estranged one away from enmity into the path of forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation."

Yet the portrayal of God in eight parables in Matthew clashes with Jesus' explicit teachings about peacemaking and his nonviolent responses to violence. Reid evaluates seven ways that we might interpret these violent parables.

- ▶ *Matthew misunderstood Jesus.* Maybe the evangelist missed the point about God's boundless love and put wrongheaded words into Jesus' mouth. However, not only does this view undermine Matthew's trustworthiness, it also fails to explain why other Gospels have violent parables (cf. Luke 19:27).
- ▶ *Jesus did not teach nonviolence.* Yet this is hard to accept, for we have no stories of Jesus retaliating against those who harm him. Moreover, how could we explain why early Christians, by the second century, embraced a "love of enemies" ethic?
- ▶ *Matthew weaves together conflicting views of God*—one says God is gracious to the unrighteous; another says God violently punishes them. But this is puzzling: which do we emulate?
- ▶ *Matthew gives advanced and basic instruction*—to mature disciples he teaches peacemaking, but to the immature he offers frightening parables of punishment. But he does not flag these teachings



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as higher and lower. So, why should we “progress toward love of enemies, and not go in the reverse direction—that is, resort to violence if love does not work?”

- ▶ *These parables are not about God.* Perhaps “the powerful males in the parables are not meant to be metaphors for God.” But Matthew explicitly identifies them in 13:37 and 18:35.
- ▶ *These parables describe the end-time, not our time.* Jesus’ nonviolence does not apply to the final judgment, but to how we face evildoers “to convert them and to safe guard against becoming an evildoer oneself by not imitating the violence of the aggressor.” The parables, in contrast, use symbols for “the dire consequences of not becoming a disciple.”
- ▶ *At the end-time, evildoers bring violence on themselves.* God does not become “vindictive and violent,” but “those who refuse to imitate the gratuitous, unearned love of God choose instead to fuel the cycles of violence, and thus, by their choice, become a victim of this violence themselves.”

“While each of these solutions has value, it is the last two that most satisfactorily resolve the tension of how God acts, as exemplified and taught by the Matthean Jesus,” Reid concludes. “The gift of love, even of enemies, and the command that this be emulated by disciples, stands at the core. Precisely how that is to be enacted remains to be discerned in each specific circumstance.”

### Study Questions

1. According to Reid, what nonviolent responses to violence are modeled by Jesus and others in the Gospel of Matthew? Is it correct to speak of “the nonviolent Jesus” in this Gospel?
2. How would you summarize Jesus’ teaching on nonviolence in the Sermon on the Mount? Does he give specific guidance for action, describe a character trait we should have, or both?
3. In the parables in Matthew, how does God deal violently with evildoers?
4. Do you agree with Reid’s evaluation of the seven options for interpreting the violent parables? Do you know a better way?
5. In today’s violent world, what is the danger of interpreting God as punishing evildoers (even in the end-time)? Should we play down these parables and focus instead on God’s gracious love for everyone?

### Departing Hymn: “God of All Power, and Truth, and Grace” (verses 1, 5, and 4)

God of all power, and truth, and grace  
that shall from age to age endure,  
whose Word, when heaven and earth shall pass,  
remains and stands for ever sure;

O take this heart of stone away!  
Your sway it does not, cannot own;  
in me no longer let it stay,  
O take away this heart of stone!

Give me a new, a perfect heart,  
from doubt, and fear, and sorrow free;  
the mind that was in Christ impart,  
and let my spirit cleave to Thee.

*Charles Wesley (1742), alt.*  
Tune: MARYTON



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### Focus Article:

📖 Hazmats or Good Gifts?  
(Parables, pp. 37-43)

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# Wealth: Hazmat or Good Gift?

Jesus' striking parables on wealth in the Gospel of Luke paint a vivid portrait of the two-sided impact of money and possessions on our lives. These are clearly "hazmats," or hazardous materials, to be handled with extreme caution. They are also good gifts with an equally positive potential.

### Prayer

**Scripture Reading:** Luke 12:13-21, 16:1-13, and 16:19-31

### Responsive Reading

We are gathered by God's Spirit to hear the story  
**that uncovers our competitiveness  
and invites us to true community,**  
uncovers our wrong centering  
and invites us to a right centering,  
**and uncovers our need to hoard and exclude  
and invites us to share and include.**

We give thanks for this story that overcomes our timidity  
**and invites us to risk all for the sake of God's Kingdom.**

**All: We will hear the story  
that uncovers our self-centered despair and distrust  
and invites us to hope.**

### Reflection

Using three of his most memorable characters—a greedy barn-building farmer, a double-dealing middle manager, and the rich man in Hades—Jesus depicts the spiritual dangers of wealth. We begin to see why he warns his disciples, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.... But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" (6:20b, 24).

The image which Jesus paints in these three parables about the use of money and our attitudes toward possessions is complex. Dorothy Jean Weaver calls attention to these facets:

- ▶ *Wealth is good and enables good living.* Jesus does not glorify poverty; it brings "evil things"—illness and perpetual hunger—to Lazarus in his lifetime (16:25). The rich man, like the wealthy farmer, can have "good things"—ease and fullness.
- ▶ *Wealth is transitory.* A farmer's retirement savings goes to others on the night he dies (12:20); a crooked manager suddenly faces bleak prospects (16:3); and a rich man's wealth is gone in Hades (16:23). The point is clear: "money, possessions, and the good life that they bring with them are at best ephemeral in character and in the end completely untrustworthy."
- ▶ *Wealth obscures moral vision.* The rich man knows Lazarus by name, but he looks past him day after day. "As long as he is wealthy and self-sufficient, he has eyes only for himself and cares nothing for the welfare of others." Similarly, "the possessions of the rich farmer have closed his eyes to the world around him and obscured his vision of people in need."
- ▶ *Wealth creates chasms between people.* "The inability to see others becomes an impassable barrier that separates people one from another and prohibits meaningful interaction," Weaver notes.



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The rich man's moral blindness toward Lazarus during his lifetime "now isolates him from human contact and comfort in his own time of need."

- ▶ *Wealth destroys moral character.* The bigger-barn-building farmer is driven by greed (12:15). "The lure of money and possessions... pulls the manager [in 16:1-13] inexorably into a moral quagmire, where one 'dishonest' deed follows another as he tries desperately to preserve his life and his lifestyle."
- ▶ *Wealth is a good gift.* The farmer who is "not rich toward God" (12:21) faces stern judgment. "But Jesus' words suggest the potential of a very different story, one about a rich farmer who is 'rich toward God' and generous to his neighbors." The story of the wily manager ironically shows "Money and possessions, even when depicted as 'dishonest wealth' (16:9), are good gifts with positive potential for blessing others and opening the door to one's own blessedness."

"Jesus calls his followers to 'serve God' instead of their wealth (16:13) and to be 'rich toward God' rather than 'storing up treasures for themselves' (12:21)," Weaver concludes. "If any questions remain as to the faithful use of 'stuff,' Jesus sends his followers to 'Moses and the prophets' for ongoing instruction (16:29, 31). Faithfulness with money and possessions grows ultimately out of faithful 'listening' to Scripture."

### Study Questions

1. How are each of the main characters in these parables – the rich farmer, the dishonest manager, and the rich man – self-absorbed? How does this obscure their moral vision?
2. What does it mean to be "rich toward God"? Must a person be wealthy in order to be rich toward God? Do you agree with Weaver that wealthy persons can be rich toward God?
3. In light of these three parables on money and possessions, what are some of the main barriers today to a follower of Jesus being both wealthy and faithful?
4. "Faithfulness with money and possessions grows ultimately out of faithful 'listening' to Scripture," Weaver concludes. How is your congregation helping members to listen?

### Departing Hymn: "O Young and Fearless Prophet of Ancient Galilee" (verses 6, 4, and 5)

O young and fearless Prophet, we need your presence here,  
amid our pride and glory to see your face appear;  
once more to hear your challenge above our noisy day,  
again to lead us forward along God's holy way.

Stir up in us a protest against our greed for wealth,  
while others starve and hunger and plead for work and health;  
where homes with little children cry out for lack of bread,  
who live their years sore burdened beneath a gloomy dread.

Create in us the splendor that dawns when hearts are kind,  
that knows not race nor station as boundaries of the mind;  
that learns to value beauty, in heart, or brain, or soul,  
and longs to bind God's children into one perfect whole.

*S. Ralph Harlow (1931)*

*Suggested Tune: ST. THEOLDULPH*



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

- 📖 Hearing Parables  
in the Patch  
(*Parables*, pp. 80-87)

### Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Hands of the Father  
(*Parables*, pp. 71-75)
- 📖 A Gesture of  
Reconciliation  
(*Parables*, pp. 66-70)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to  
[Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu)

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# Hearing Parables in the Cotton Patch

Clarence Jordan (1912-1969) was an unusually able interpreter of Jesus' parables. Not only his academic study, but also his small-town background and experiences in establishing the interracial Koinonia Farm in the 1940s shaped his ability to hear the parables in "the Cotton Patch."

### Prayer

Loving Father, Creator and Sustainer of all, as a hen gathers her young, you gather us to yourself.  
For we live in response to your story—a story that reminds us that you made us, and we chose to fall away from you into sin. Yet you did not leave us in our sin. In your mercy and grace, you gave to us Jesus the Christ in whom we have redemption. To you, Holy and Triune God, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority now and forever. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

### Reflection

Clarence Jordan has been called a twentieth-century prophet for his views on race, economics, and war. The community he founded, Koinonia Farm, continues to be a beacon of racial reconciliation and rural economic development near Americus, GA. And the international Christian housing project, Habitat for Humanity, blossomed from a plan for "partnership housing" that he and Millard Fuller developed at Koinonia Farm in 1965.

In his popular Cotton Patch translations of New Testament books, Jordan relocated the story of Jesus and the early Church to the contemporary rural South. Thus, Romans became *The Letter to Christians in Washington* and Philippians was *The Letter to the Alabaster African Church*. Despite "Jordan's homespun style in the Cotton Patch translations," writes Joel Snider, "his translations were based on an extensive knowledge of the original language of the New Testament, *koine* Greek."

Jesus' parables, or "the Comparisons" in the Cotton Patch version, held a special interest for Jordan. He believed their "characters and action disguise the truth, which must then be deduced by the hearer," Snider notes. "The story changes the scene and the setting in order to throw the audience a bit off guard until the point can be made. Jesus often used parables when the situation was delicate or dangerous—when he could not speak directly to the issue at hand. If a frontal assault against emotional or spiritual defenses was likely to fail, Jesus used a parable to bait people into listening. In other words, parables were the perfect rhetorical tool for challenging the resistance of the status quo."

Jordan called those parables that slip past our defenses and deliver an unpopular prophetic message, "Trojan horse parables." Nathan's story against King David is an example. "As Nathan tells his story about the man who stole his neighbor's sheep (2 Samuel 12:1-4), King David never sees the trap laid for him in the story until he is caught in it: 'Old King David, he's looking and looking,' taught



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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Jordan, 'but don't [sic] hear anything. He's listening and listening, but doesn't see anything.'"

Not only did Jesus tell *narrative parables* (simple comparisons and stories), his life was filled with *dramatic parables*, Jordan said. These events "where the message was intentionally deeper than the ostensible action...[included] the signs in John's Gospel, the temptation of Jesus, the virgin birth, and the Lord's Supper."

Is this distinction also our key to understanding Jordan's prophetic life? The narrative parables ("the Comparisons") he loved to translate and teach so shaped his imagination that Koinonia Farm became a dramatic parable—a Trojan parable in his beloved rural South. "If you only followed the parables," the writer Kafka once said, "you yourselves might become parables."

### Study Questions

1. What does Jordan mean by a "Trojan parable"? In what way is the Parable of the Prodigal Son such a parable? Have other parables of Jesus been Trojan parables for you?
2. Clarence Jordan distinguishes between *narrative* and *dramatic* parables. What are some examples of dramatic parables for Jordan, and why does he call them "parables"?
3. Discuss the parallels Jordan draws between the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) and Gerasene demoniac (Luke 8:26-38). What insights does he gain from this approach to the parable?
4. How do Rembrandt and Guercino—Protestant and Catholic artists, respectively, in the seventeenth century—depict the father's hands in order to emphasize his gracious welcome of the returning prodigal son?

### Departing Hymn: "Tell Me the Old, Old Story" (verses 1, 2, 4a, and 3b)

Tell me the old, old story of unseen things above,  
of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.  
Tell me the story simply, as to a little child,  
for I am weak and weary, and helpless and defiled.

*Tell me the old, old story; tell me the old, old story.  
Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and his love.*

Tell me the old, old story that I may take it in—  
that wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin.  
Tell me the story often, for I forget so soon;  
the early dew of morning has passed away at noon.

#### Refrain

Tell me the same old story when you have cause to fear  
that this world's empty glory is costing me too dear.  
Tell me the story always, if you would ready be,  
in any time of trouble, a comforter to me.

#### Refrain

A. Katherine Hankey (1866)  
Tune: EVANGEL

# Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

# The Contexts of Jesus' Parables

## Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To introduce the study of Jesus' parables through an overview of their Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural contexts.
2. To explore how knowledge of these cultural contexts can enrich our interpretation of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Parables (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Comment

When it comes to interpreting Jesus' parables, the problem is not that they don't mean anything, but that readers give them such different meanings. Indeed, their "poetic images [yield] not one-dimensional meaning but an expansive suggestiveness or elasticity of meaning," notes Paul Duke. "Though parables are not Rorschach tests for undisciplined free association, we can rightly think of a certain polyvalence of meaning in them. They may invite us to more than one trajectory of reflection, more than one possibility for decision" (quoted in *Parables*, p. 61). How can we zero in on the parables' meanings for Jesus, his first disciples, and the early church?

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 16:19-31 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

Which parables are most memorable for group members, and which are most puzzling? What Paul Duke calls their "expansive suggestiveness" – the layers of meaning that "invite us to more than one trajectory of reflection, more than one possibility of decision" – make these stories both memorable and puzzling.

The cultural contexts of Jesus' parables can help us unravel their meaning. David Gowler surveys two elements of Jewish context – (1) Jesus and his audience knew the *meshalim* in Scripture, and (2) other rabbis in his day, like those whose teachings were recorded centuries later, may have used parables to explain Scripture. Then he surveys two elements of the Greco-Roman context – (3) the Greek fable and (4) the worldview of first-century peasants – for the parables reach us through Gospels written in Greek and directed to readers in Greco-Roman culture.

## Study Questions

1. Kline Snodgrass<sup>†</sup> has compiled the following list of Jesus' parables:  
In the Gospel of Mark: *Bridegroom's Guests* (Mk. 2:19-20/Mt. 9:15/Lk. 5:33-39), *Unshrunk Cloth* (Mk. 2:21/Mt. 9:16/Lk. 5:36), *New Wine* (Mk. 2:22/Mt. 9:17/Lk. 5:37-39), *Strong Man Bound* (Mk. 3:22-27/Mt. 12:29-30/Lk. 11:21-23), *Sower* (Mk. 4:1-9, 13-20/Mt. 13:1-9, 18-23/Lk. 8:4-8, 11-15), *Lamp and Measure*

(Mk. 4:26-29/Lk. 8:16-18), *Seed Growing Secretly* (Mk. 4:26-29), *Mustard Seed* (Mk. 4:30-32/Mt. 13:31-32/Lk. 13:18-19), *Wicked Tenants* (Mk. 12:1-12/Mt. 21:33-46/Lk. 20:9-19), *Budding Fig Tree* (Mk. 13:28-32/Mt. 24:32-36/Lk. 21:29-33), and *Watchman* (Mk. 13:34-36/Lk. 12:35-38).

In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke: *Wise and Foolish Builders* (Mt. 7:24-27/Lk. 6:47-49), *Father and Children's Requests* (Mt. 7:9-11/Lk. 11:11-13), *Two Ways/Doors* (Mt. 7:13-14/Lk. 13:23-27), *Leaven* (Mt. 13:33/Lk. 13:20-21), *Lost Sheep* (Mt. 18:12-14/Lk. 15:1-7), *Wedding Banquet* (Mt. 22:1-14/Lk. 14:15-24), *Thief in the Night* (Mt. 24:42-44/Lk. 12:39-40), *Faithful and Unfaithful Steward* (Mt. 24:45-51/Lk. 12:42-46), and *Talents and Pounds* (Mt. 25:14-30/Lk. 19:11-27).

In Matthew only: *Good and Bad Trees* (7:16-20), *Fishnet* (13:47-50), *Wheat and Tares* (13:24-20, 36-43), *Treasure* (13:44), *Pearl* (13:45-46), *Unmerciful Servant* (18:23-35), *Laborers in the Vineyard* (20:1-16), *Two Sons* (21:28-32), *Wise and Foolish Maidens* (25:1-13), and *Sheep and Goats* (25:31-46).

In Luke only: *Two Debtors* (7:41-50), *Good Samaritan* (10:25-37), *Friend at Midnight* (11:5-8), *Rich Fool* (12:13-21), *Barren Fig Tree* (13:6-9), *Tower Builder* (14:28-30), *Warring King* (14:31-33), *Lost Sheep* (15:1-7), *Lost Coin* (15:8-10), *Prodigal Son* (15:11-32), *Unjust Steward* (16:1-8), *Rich Man and Lazarus* (16:19-31), *Humble Servant* (17:7-10), *Unjust Judge* (18:1-8), and *Pharisee and Tax Collector* (18:9-14).

In John only: *Good Shepherd* (10:1-18; cf. Mt. 18:12-14; Lk. 15:1-7), and *True Vine* (15:1-8).

- Members might mention short parables like *Bridegroom's Guests* (Mt. 9:15), *Unshrunk Cloth* (Mk. 2:21/Mt. 9:16/Lk. 5:36), *New Wine* (Mk. 2:22/Mt. 9:17/Lk. 5:37-39), *Leaven* (Mt. 13:33/Lk. 13:20-21), *Treasure* (Mt. 13:44), or *Pearl* (Mt. 13:45-46). Most of Jesus' parables are longer stories.
- Of the Old Testament *meshalim*, Nathan's story the Poor Man's Only Lamb (2 Samuel 12:1-4) is most similar to Jesus' narrative parable; like Nathan, Jesus uses his story to sidestep the defenses of his auditors ("the Pharisees, who were lovers of money," but possibly "his disciples") in order to reveal the darkness in their lives.

Like the later rabbinic parables, Jesus' story "is neither a simple tale with a transparent lesson nor an opaque story with a secret message; it is a narrative that actively elicits from its audience the interpretation and application of its message."

Jesus' parable does not have a moral attached, but it shares other features with Greek fables: (1) it sheds light on aspects of human experience, (2) it involves ordinary human characters, (3) it illustrates a religious and ethical theme, and (4) it features an ironic reversal.

Gowler suggests first-century peasants would readily understand the rich man's condemnation, for he fails to be a responsible patron. Other ancient stories describe the reversal of rewards for rich and poor in the afterlife.

- Deuteronomy 15:7-11 commands that men and women who have adequate resources should "give liberally and be ungrudging" in lending to "anyone in need," even if this is costly because a sabbatical year is approaching when the needy person's debts will be completely forgiven (15:1). Because the rich man ignores Lazarus' suffering at his front door, a first-century Jewish listener might conclude that he is willfully violating God's law.
- The divine inspiration and power in Jesus' instruction does not depend on the uniqueness of his teaching method. Yet the originality of his approach might cause us to wonder, along with his hometown friends, "Where did this man get this wisdom?" (Matthew 13:54).

### **Departing Hymn**

"Christ's Parables" is on pp. 51-53 of Parables. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

† Kline Snodgrass, "Parable," in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 595.

# Hearing Parables with the Early Church

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To introduce the method of allegorical interpretation of Jesus' parables.
2. To illustrate and recommend this traditional method of interpretation with regard to the Parable of the Good Samaritan.
3. To consider how Christian artists have adopted and extended the traditional allegorical interpretation of this parable.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Parables (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "How Kind the Good Samaritan" locate the familiar tune, HESPERUS, in your church's hymnal or on the web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Story

The oldest surviving comments on the Parable of the Good Samaritan are in a sermon by the Alexandrian theologian Origen (185-c. 254). He interpreted it as an allegory in which the central figure represents Christ:

The Samaritan, "who took pity on the man who had fallen among thieves," is truly a "guardian," and a closer neighbor than the Law and the Prophets. He showed that he was the man's neighbor more by deed than by word. According to the passage that says, "Be imitators of me, as I too am of Christ," it is possible for us to imitate Christ and to pity those who "have fallen among thieves." We can go to them, bind their wounds, pour in oil and wine, put them on our own animals, and bear their burdens. The Son of God encourages us to do things like this. He is speaking not so much to the teacher of the law as to us and to everyone when he says, "Go and do likewise." (*Homilies on the Gospel of Luke*, 34.9; quoted in *Parables*, p. 24)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 10:25-37 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

Early Christians read Jesus' parables as allegories about God, but this traditional approach is often dismissed by modern scholars as being an uncontrollable projection by the interpreter. Using the Parable of the Good Samaritan as his example, Mikeal Parsons reconsiders this method of interpretation and shows us how to use it carefully and critically.

Parsons interprets this parable, which is recorded only in Luke's Gospel, within its literary context. Luke carefully places it with other stories that illustrate how we should love the Lord and our neighbors. In a way, then, Luke 10:25-11:13 is an extended answer to the lawyer's searching question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:25).

### Study Questions

1. On the one hand, Parsons wants us to appreciate and learn from the Church's allegorical tradition; on the other, he thinks allegorical interpretations of Jesus' parables may be more in tune with how the early Christians heard and the Gospel writers employed these stories in the Greco-Roman culture. The danger of allegorizing is that we might get carried away from the meaning of the parable by trying to make every character and event represent something else. Parsons shows how both the literary context—the other stories in chapters 10 and 11 of Luke's Gospel as well as the meaning of mercy throughout that Gospel—and the cultural context—the ancient virtue of philanthropy—guide and, in this instance, support the early Christian's allegorical reading of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.
2. In Luke's Gospel, Samaritans are "outsiders." Jesus refers to the Samaritan man who returns to thank him for healing his leprosy as an *allogenes*—a stranger or foreigner (Luke 17:18). Jesus' opponents use "Samaritan" as a term of abuse for him (John 8:48). When Jesus identifies his love (and God's love) with the Samaritan's philanthropy, he forces us look again at the people whom we treat as "not one of us" and to see God in them. He reminds us that God comes to us as "not one of us," as an Other.
3. Assign members to review the four stories: Luke 10:29-37 (Parable of the Good Samaritan), 10:38-42 (the character of Mary), 11:1-4 (the Lord's Prayer, as an instance of Jesus' devotion), and 11:5-13 (the Parable of the Friend at Midnight). They might mention such things as these: loving the Lord includes prioritizing our commitments (like Mary), submitting to God's will, and relying upon God's care (as in Jesus' prayer); loving our neighbors includes caring for them in their misfortune (like the Samaritan) and making sacrifices to care for their needs (as in the Parable of the Friend at Night).
4. Bassano and He Qi stay close to the events in Jesus' parable—down to the Samaritan having a donkey for transportation and employing wine and oil to cleanse the man's wounds—but they depict the characters as figures, Italian or Chinese, in their own time. Ask members to imagine the scene. Would they imagine the Samaritan in a similar way? How old would he be, what would be his ethnicity, how would he dress, and so on? Would they change the action and props of the story? Notice that Bassano depicts the Samaritan as a peasant.
5. John Newton extends the images from Jesus' parable into an allegory for the Christian's spiritual journey. The unfortunate traveler becomes every person and his injuries become "wounds the soul receives" from the sin and distortion in our lives. The inn stands for the Church "prepared for sinners lost," where the rescued traveler is "clothed and fed" (through baptism and communion) back to health. The Samaritan's promised return to the inn (Luke 10:35) becomes a foreshadowing of Jesus' return, when his presence will elicit joyful and grateful praise from the restored traveler. (Newton's hymn, in the famous collection *Olney Hymns* [1779], has eight verses. You can download the entire text of this hymn at [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org) online.)

It would be a mistake to project Newton's analogies back onto Jesus' parable. But isn't it helpful to allow our imaginations to be stretched and shaped by Jesus' stories so that we can discern patterns of grace in our lives?

### Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# Hearing Is Believing

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Mark 1:14-45
Meditation	Meditation	Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss “Mark and the Biggest Parable of All”
Questions 1, 2, and 3 or 4	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To interpret the “seed” parables which are a key to Jesus’ teachings in Mark’s Gospel.
2. To consider why the Gospel of Mark presents Jesus’ instruction so sparingly.
3. To discuss how we are “hearing” Jesus’ parables and sharing the gospel today.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Parables (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Comment

“Today we are particularly conditioned *not* to hear things. We have trained ourselves to reduce advertisements, commercials, background music, television, telephone solicitations, and countless other public sounds and intrusions to ‘white noise,’” James Edwards observes. “Next time you are on an airplane, watch people during the seatbelt demonstration. They are intent not to hear a spiel that is intended to save their lives.... But how can we ensure that we do not reduce the proclamation of the gospel to white noise as well?” (*Parables*, pp. 44 and 48).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God would use Jesus’ parables to open our eyes, unstop our ears, and heal our hearts so that we might turn toward God and our neighbors in love.

## Scripture Reading

Ask three group members to read Mark 4:1-9, 4:10-20, and 4:26-34 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

## Reflection

This discussion of parables in Mark is one of three study guides on the key themes in Jesus’ parables in the synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The companion studies are “Violent Parables and the Non-violent Jesus” (Matthew) and “Hazmats or Good Gifts?” (Luke).

Mark records only eleven parables. The four collected in Mark 4:1-34 are bounded by Jesus’ explanation of why he tells parables. (This study focuses on the three “seed” parables.) The Parable of the Sower anchors the unit. Matthew and Luke also record some of the parables:

<i>Sower</i>	Mark 4:1-9, 13-20	Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23	Luke 8:4-8, 11-15
<i>[Lamp and Measure</i>	Mark 4:21-25		Luke 8:16-18]
<i>Growing Seed</i>	Mark 4:26-29		
<i>Mustard Seed</i>	Mark 4:30-32	Matthew 13:31-32	Luke 13:18-19

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one, review the three “seed” parables in Mark 4 and explore how we are hearing and sharing the gospel today. In the other session, study Mark 1:14-45, which describes a day in Jesus’ ministry, and discuss Martha Sterne’s suggestion that we should interpret the Gospel of Mark as “the biggest parable of all.”

### Study Questions

1. “Mark is sparing with the content of Jesus’ teaching,” Edwards suggests, “because he wants to prepare readers for Jesus’ teaching.... We stand a better chance of understanding the gospel, in Mark’s mind, if we first see it demonstrated.... Mark’s vigorous narrative is designed to prepare us to hear what Jesus has to say. But hearing is difficult, and especially so when it is our first contact with Jesus. Mark postpones the teachings of Jesus until our familiarity with him puts us in a position to *understand* him.”

The Parable of the Sower is significant for several reasons: it is the longest and most developed narrative parable in Mark, it anchors the central set of parables in chapter 4 that present Jesus’ ministry in relation to the Kingdom, and its interpretation is the occasion for Jesus to explain how we should *hear* the gospel. Once we have seen Jesus in action (in chapters 1 through 3), we are prepared to hear his call to respond to the good news revealed through his ministry and teaching.

2. Divide into three groups to brainstorm how the gospel is being distorted today and our hearing is reduced to “in one ear and out the other” because (1) Satan takes away the word, (2) we are so rootless that tribulation or persecution causes us to beat a hasty retreat, or (3) we are so concerned for wealth and possessions that the word becomes fruitless.

Discuss specific strategies, given the problems mentioned by these groups, for engaging the gospel in an ongoing, sustained way. Do we best hear and heed the gospel in this way that bears fruit when we listen as individuals or as members of an attentive community?

3. Members might discuss how Christians can distort the good news into a pushy and domineering legalism when they try to “enforce” the gospel in their homes, at work, or in society. Or, how Christians may dilute or modify the gospel in an effort to make it more attractive to people today. A proper balance of “faithful love and judgment” (in Mark Moeller’s words) is more difficult to realize when we are not patient and trusting of the gospel’s power.
4. Mark 1:14-45 shows the shape and pattern of Jesus’ ministry, Sterne says. “You can look at the whole parabolic arc of his life or just the parable of a day and you find that the power and the glory radiate the same,” she writes. Jesus exhibits a new understanding of power, “the power of self-giving, self-sacrificing love.” Jesus “didn’t approach folks the power way, which is to terrify them with what will happen if they don’t please you or to seduce them with what will happen if they do please you.... He didn’t gather other people’s power to himself. Instead he gave power away from the get-go to some very unlikely, weak people.... And Jesus didn’t stay in one place long enough to build a power structure.”

Sterne labels the entire Gospel of Mark a “parable” because its entire rapid-fire report of Jesus’ ministry leaves us “with the joy and wonder of figuring out *What was that?*”

5. Christ’s parables give us glimpses of God’s “Kingdom that both is and is to be” (verse 2), which “spur us to reflect in fitting ways/on [God’s] faithful love and judgment” (verse 1). The hymn is a prayer to God, asking that God will use these stories to move us toward faithful discipleship in three ways: “move us from complacency” about ourselves and the world (verse 1), “challenge us anew / to repeat your wondrous story, calling humankind to you” (verse 3), and change “our hearts to live your story ‘til your holy Kingdom comes” (verse 3).

### Departing Hymn

“Christ’s Parables” is on pp. 51-53 of *Parables*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# Violent Parables and the Nonviolent Jesus

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Matthew 5:11-12, 38-48; 6:13	Matthew 13:36-43; 13:47-50; and 18:23-35
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading		Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss Jesus' teachings and example of nonviolence	Discuss the violent parables in Matthew
Questions 3, 4, and 5	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3, 4, and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To review Jesus' teaching on nonviolence and peacemaking in the Sermon on the Mount.
2. To consider Jesus' eight parables in Matthew in which God deals violently with evildoers.
3. To examine how the violence in these parables should be interpreted in light of Jesus' life and teachings.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Parables (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "God of All Power, and Truth, and Grace" locate the familiar tune MARY-TON in your church's hymnal or on the web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Story

On September 11, 2001, Barbara Reid was leading a study tour on the West Bank. "I was in my room in Bethany, preparing the next day's class lecture, when one of my students alerted me that something was happening at home. As we watched the unfolding events on television, our group's reactions went from shock, to dawning comprehension, to grief for the lives lost and the families left bereft, to gratitude for the outpouring of compassion from our hosts and even from strangers on the street. My own reaction then turned to icy fear that as a nation we would not have the courage to examine the root causes of what could lead to such an attack and that we would all too quickly shift into retaliation, vengeance, and violent warfare" (*Parables*, 27).

Her story reminds us that how we interpret the violence in Jesus' parables has important consequences for how we respond to evildoers and share the gospel in today's violent world.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to give the group discernment as you prayerfully study the violent parables by the nonviolent Jesus.

## Scripture Reading

Ask three group members to read Matthew 13:36-43, 13:47-50, and 18:23-35 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

This discussion of eight violent parables in Matthew is one of three study guides on the key themes in Jesus' parables in the synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The companion studies are "Hearing is Believing" (Mark) and "Hazmats or Good Gifts?" (Luke). Of the Matthean parables with violent endings, Barbara Reid notes that four "are unique to Matthew: the Weeds and the Wheat (13:24-30, 36-43), the Dragnet (13:47-50), Forgiveness Aborted (18:23-35), and the Final Judgment (25:31-46). In the other four—Treacherous Tenants

(21:33-46), the Wedding Feast (22:1-14), Faithful Servants (24:45-51), and the Talents (25:14-30) — Matthew makes the evildoing and the ensuing punishments more explicit and intense.”

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one, review Jesus’ teachings on peacemaking in the Sermon on the Mount and his nonviolence response to his enemies. In the other session, discuss how to interpret the violent endings of the eight parables in Matthew.

### **Study Questions**

1. Reid identifies seven nonviolent responses to violence in the Gospel of Matthew: *avoidance or flight* as when Jesus’ family escapes Herod and Archelaus (2:13-15, 19-23), or when Jesus tells disciples to flee persecution (10:23); *rejoicing over persecution* (5:11-12); *supplication for deliverance* from evil (6:13); and responding to violence with *nonretaliation, nonviolent confrontation, love of enemies, and prayer for persecutors* (5:38-48).
2. Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, including the instructions on nonviolence, are the fulfillment and right interpretation of the Law, not its abolition (Matthew 5:17). Reid groups Jesus’ instruction under six headings: *rejoicing over persecution* (5:11-12), *supplication for deliverance* from evil (6:13), and responding to violence with *nonretaliation, nonviolent confrontation, love of enemies, and prayer for persecutors* (5:38-48). “The Sermon on the Mount gives examples that serve to jog the imagination into new possibilities of action toward perpetrators of violence that neither ignore the wrongdoing nor retaliate in kind,” says Reid. “What it does not provide is a ready-made solution for all occasions.”
3. Assign individuals or groups to review the violent endings in the Weeds and the Wheat (13:40-42), the Dragnet (13:49-50), Forgiveness Aborted (18:34-35), Treacherous Tenants (21:41, 43-44), the Wedding Feast (22:11-13), Faithful Servants (24:51), the Talents (25:30), and the Final Judgment (25:41). Reid summarizes: “The punishments God metes out to evildoers include throwing them into a fiery furnace, binding them hand and foot, casting them into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, putting them to a miserable death, cutting and breaking them into pieces and crushing them, destroying murderers and burning their city, depriving them of the presence of God, and putting them with hypocrites or with the devil and his angels for all eternity.”
4. Consider how Reid evaluates the seven options with a high view of Scripture. She wants to preserve Jesus’ teachings on nonviolence and Matthew’s reliability as an evangelist. She seems to reject the “two-level” solution — i.e., different teachings for mature and immature disciples — because it requires an extra-biblical way of deciding what counts as “mature.” She favors the seventh option because it is suggested by the relationship between the unforgiving slave and the generous master in the Parable of Forgiveness Aborted (18:23-35).
5. “Disciples can easily hear an assurance that they belong to the saved while others who they perceive as evildoers are condemned,” Reid warns. “Making rigid demarcations between good and evil in the present time does not allow them to face the mix of righteousness and wickedness within each person and each community in the present.... Reading that God punishes evildoers violently, human beings in positions of power may understand the Gospel as giving divine approbation to their meting out violent punishment, even execution, to those judged as evildoers.” Are people in danger of adopting this attitude in the “war on terror”? Is playing down God’s final punishment of evildoers our only option? Members might discuss the Apostle Paul’s alternative stance — that God is responsible for final retribution and we are not (see Romans 12:19-21) — which takes divine punishment seriously.

### **Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# Wealth: Hazmat or Good Gift?

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To explore Jesus' teaching about money and possessions in three Lukan parables.
2. To examine the spiritual dangers of wealth for us today.
3. To consider how we can be "rich toward God."

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Parables (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "O Young and Fearless Prophet of Ancient Galilee" locate the familiar tune ST. THEODULPH in your church's hymnal or on the web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Comment

"Michel Quoist reminds us that 'If we knew how to listen to God, if we knew how to look around us, our whole life would become prayer.' Yes, that is precisely what we want to have happen. We want to *see* and *listen* so that all of life becomes a prayer. Jesus told parables precisely to get people to do so." (E. Glenn Hinson, quoted in *Parables*, p. 61)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God would use Jesus' parables to open our eyes, unstop our ears, and heal our hearts so that we might turn toward God and our neighbors in love.

## Scripture Reading

Ask three group members to read Luke 12:13-21, 16:1-13, and 16:19-31 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

This discussion of parables in Luke is one of three study guides on the key themes in Jesus' parables in the synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The companion studies are "Hearing is Believing" (Mark) and "Violent Parables and the Nonviolent Jesus" (Matthew).

The parables in this study—the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21), the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-13), and the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)—appear only in the Gospel of Luke.

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager may be the most puzzling parable because the rich master commends the double-dealing manager for his shrewdness; and Jesus similarly urges the disciples to "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes" (16:9). Brad Young offers a helpful interpretation of this story based on the first-century Palestinian context (quoted in *Parables*, 42). For more information on the Greco-Roman context of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, see the final section of David Gowler's "The Contexts of Jesus' Parables" (*Parables*, 16-17) and the accompanying study guide, "The Contexts of Jesus' Parables."

## Study Questions

1. The rich farmer thinks only of himself as he considers what to do with his growing wealth. Neighbors who have needs are nowhere in his thought. Weaver highlights the self-centeredness of the farmer's private monologue (12:17-19) with her translation: "And he thought to himself, 'What should *I* do, for *I* have no place [where *I* can] store *my* crops?' Then he said, '*I* will do this: *I* will pull down *my* barns and [*I* will] build larger ones, and there *I* will store all *my* grain and *my* goods. And *I* will say to *my* soul, 'Soul, *you* have ample goods laid up for many years; [*you* must] relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"

The dishonest manager thinks in much the same way. This is Weaver's translation of his private monologue (16:3-4): "Then the manager said to himself, 'What will *I* do, now that *my* master is taking the position away from *me*? *I* am not strong enough to dig, and *I* am ashamed to beg. *I* have decided what [*I* will] do so that, when *I* am dismissed as manager, people may welcome *me* into their homes."

The rich man intentionally ignores Lazarus' suffering during his life; though "the rich man knows Lazarus by name and reputation (16:24-25)," Weavers notes, "his eyes evidently glaze over day by day at the pathetic sight in front of his gate."

2. The phrase "not rich toward God" describes the selfish farmer (Luke 12:21). Weaver suggests Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) is an example of being rich toward God, for "his wealth becomes a good gift that enriches the 'poor' and provides extravagant restitution for those who have been 'defrauded' (19:8)." To be "rich toward God" is to use our money and possessions to love God and neighbor. A person with little money and few possessions can still use their wealth in this way.
3. These parables call attention to these barriers to faithful discipleship: (1) an inordinate attempt to guarantee our personal and family health, opportunities, and retirement with our wealth; (2) the temptation to close our eyes to the world around us and ignore people in need; (3) and the temptation to ignore how our choices about the use of money and possessions gradually change us (for better or worse) by modifying our desires, ways of thinking, and patterns of perception.

Encourage members to discuss specific temptations in their lives. Do they come from comparing their "success" with others', trying to live up to images of success in popular media (magazines, television, or movies), worrying too much about their own welfare, being too protective of family members' or friends' welfare, being too busy or distracted to notice others' needs, being overwhelmed by human needs in the world, and so on. Our temptations might not arise from selfishness, but from inordinate fear, despair, or lack of focus.

4. How does the congregation provide winsome small-group study opportunities for children, young people, and adults? Does a catechism or new member orientation group discuss the discipleship of wealth?

Consider how scripture passages on wealth are used in community worship – in responsive readings, scripture readings, sermons, hymns, and so on. If the congregation provides Scripture studies for special seasons (e.g., Advent, Christmas, Lent, or Easter), do they address the discipleship of money and possessions?

What other practices of the congregation – e.g., offerings in worship, special mission offerings, local service and mission opportunities, short-term mission trips, community prayer for or sharing of members' economic needs, planning the congregation's budget – help members to listen to Scripture in regard to the use of wealth?

## Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# Hearing Parables in the Cotton Patch

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider why Clarence Jordan, who has been called a modern prophet, was so attracted to Jesus' parables, and especially those stories that Jordan called "Trojan parables."
2. To review Jordan's concept of "dramatic parables" and consider how his own lifework became a parable in the rural South.
3. To explore the familiar Parable of the Prodigal Son with new eyes—guided by Jordan, Rembrandt, and Guercino.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Parables (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Tell Me the Old, Old Story" locate the familiar tune EVANGEL in your church's hymnal or on the web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Comment

Paul Duke has written, "As we witness these constant crazy moves [in Jesus' parables] from the common to the extravagant, from the small to the outrageous, the risky, the beautifully grand, in time it dawns on us that this insistently repeating shift is more than a pattern in parables; it is a way that human lives might come to be lived. Kafka said, 'If you only followed the parables you yourselves might become parables.' God's best parable was Jesus himself, who told the largest tales and lived the largest life, and kept saying over his shoulder, 'Follow me'" (from *The Parables: A Preaching Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005) p. 14).

Clarence Jordan was not only a gifted interpreter of Jesus' parables, but also a courageous follower of Christ. Jordan's lifework—translating the New Testament into colloquial Southern language and establishing Koinonia Farm—became a parable in the rural South.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 from a modern translation. Jordan's Cotton Patch translation of the Gospel of Luke is available in a new print edition from Smyth & Helwys Publishing ([www.Helwys.com](http://www.Helwys.com)) or may be read online at [rockhay.tripod.com/cottonpatch](http://rockhay.tripod.com/cottonpatch).

## Reflection

You can use this session to introduce the lifework of a modern prophet, Clarence Jordan. Recall the biographical details in Joel Snider's *Hearing the Parables in the Patch*. For more information about Jordan's life, see the Koinonia Farm website ([www.koinoniapartners.org](http://www.koinoniapartners.org)). Enrich this study by listening to free audio excerpts of Jordan's talks. His eight-lecture series on Jesus' parables, *The Cotton Patch Parables: A Bible Study for Thinking Christians*, is available on compact disc.

Another approach in this session is to review Jordan's insights into the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The two supplemental articles provide other rich readings of this parable: in *Hands of the Father*, Bill Shiell reflects

on Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, while Heidi Hornik and Mikeal Parsons analyze Guercino's *Return of the Prodigal Son* in *A Gesture of Reconciliation*.

### Study Questions

1. "Deriving its name from the tactical weapon employed by the Greek army in Homer's *Iliad*, a Trojan horse parable is particularly effective in communicating an unpopular message," Joel Snider writes. "This type parable tells a story in such a way as to slip past the listeners' defenses in order to release the message on the unsuspecting."  
In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we are surprised to see our rebellion on display in the younger son, and our ungrateful, judgmental attitudes revealed in the older son. What other parables lead us to acknowledge the darkness in ourselves? "Parables invite the hearer's interest with familiar settings and situations but finally veer off into the unfamiliar, shattering their homey realism and insisting on further reflection and inquiry," Ron Hanson writes. Thus, "we have the uneasy feeling that *we* are being interpreted even as we interpret them" (quoted in *Parables*, p. 61).
2. Just as *narrative parables* draw a comparison, so the *dramatic parables* are actions (such as "the signs in John's Gospel, the temptation of Jesus, the virgin birth, and the Lord's Supper") that mean more than appears on the surface. "The message was intentionally deeper than the ostensible action," writes Snider. There are dramatic parables in the Old Testament, like Ezekiel's portraying Judah's captivity by digging a hole through the wall of his house and carrying luggage in and out (Ezekiel 12:1-16). The signs, or miracles, in John's Gospel, like feeding the crowd by the sea or changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana, seem to be similar to Ezekiel's action, for they are filled with deeper symbolic meaning. Do members agree that the virgin birth and Jesus' temptation can be described this way?
3. Though the *identification* of the prodigal son and demoniac is not supported by the text, the *imaginative comparison* of the two has been a favorite of preachers (cf. Charles H. Spurgeon's famous sermon, "He Ran and 'He' Ran"). Jordan notes the demoniac and prodigal son live in "the far country" (a non-Jewish region) and tend hogs. This could cause a Jewish young man to "lose his mind," Jordan suggests, because he "had been taught that touching hog meat or 'smelling red-eyed gravy' was blasphemy. How much more did getting into the trough and eating 'slop' with the hogs present a religious crisis!" Jordan also notes that the herd of pigs across the sea from Galilee represented "bootleg" business and "religious hypocrisy at its highest form: making profit from the very items forbidden by religion."
4. "The return of the Prodigal Son to his father was a popular subject in seventeenth-century Christian art," Hornik and Parsons write. "The [Roman Catholic] Counter Reformation embraced it as an example of forgiveness and healing between family members; Protestants viewed it as a return to God the Father despite their break from the Roman Catholic Church." They find both of these meanings in Guercino's painting; Rembrandt's painting illustrates a Protestant interpretation.

In Rembrandt's painting, the light falls on the father's hands, which "are disproportionately larger than the other parts of the father's body," Shiell notes. The father offers welcoming, noncontrolling love. In contrast, "the older brother stands to the far right, dressed like a Pharisee (ironically) with his hands and arms folded. Another man sits with his arms pridefully folded. They are afraid to love as the father does."

Guercino emphasizes the father's and son's hands in a different way. They "are entwined in a classic gesture of reconciliation and...positioned at the center of the composition." Hornik and Parsons say, "The classicizing elements of the composition create a painting less of emotion and passion than of recognized rhetorical gesture of reconciliation."

### Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.