



GROW IN THE WORD

Picturing the Kingdom

an inductive group study of selected parables in Matthew's Gospel

The questions in this study are based on the [Grow in the Word Women's Workshop](#) led by Colleen McFadden at Bronx Household of Faith on Sept. 12, 2020.¹ Although some of the questions here are more detailed than those in her handouts, they are largely applications of her threefold emphasis: *Context, Structure, Jesus Christ*.

This study is intended to model one way to apply the approach taught in the workshop, in this case, to New Testament parables. You don't need to answer every question; the goal is to grow in your understanding of the *context, structure, connection to Christ, and application* of the parable you're studying. You can refer to the recording or your notes/handouts from the workshop for clarification or more direction.

By God's grace, your knowledge of and therefore your love for the God of Scripture will grow deeper, richer, and stronger as you seek to understand what he reveals in these parables. God bless your study together!

Structure of this Booklet

This booklet will guide you through the study of four parables:

The parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23)

The parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21–35)

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16)

The parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22:1–14)

The study of each parable is divided into four steps, except for the last session, which adds one final wrap-up for the whole study. The four steps are:

- Reading the Word in its **context** (A)
- Reading the Word in its **structure** (A)

- Reading the Word in light of **Jesus Christ** (B)
- **Applying** the Word you've read (B)

→ **For a 4-meeting study**, discuss all four steps for a particular parable in one meeting.

→ **For an 8-meeting study**, discuss the first two steps (labeled A) of a section in one meeting and the last two steps (labeled B) in the next meeting.

Obviously your group is free to adjust this “schedule” as needed! You might also want to spend your very first meeting talking through the introductory notes that start on the next page.

Studying as a Group

The most effective approach to using this study is probably for each member to work through the questions individually throughout the week(s), and then to get together with the group to compare notes. If that's not possible you can certainly work through the study together! If you do that, you might find it necessary to only answer the most relevant questions from each part of the session.

¹ Some questions are also taken/adapted from David Helm's *One-to-One Bible Reading: A Simple Guide for Every Christian*, 86–87.

Simplifying the Study

An alternative to using this booklet would be to use the more basic questions included in the appendix on page 28. Your group can simply get together, read the passage for the week, and work through those questions together. You could always use the questions in the main part of this booklet as a supplement or for personal study.

What Is a Parable?

One way to answer this question is to read through the Gospels, making observations about the parables Jesus told! Here are some of the things you might notice about Jesus's parables:

1. Parables are short, fictional stories that illustrate important truths.
2. Parables draw on the common, everyday experiences of their hearers (i.e., they are not “fables” where animals talk or fairy tales where knights fight fire-breathing dragons). However...
3. Jesus's parables often contain a surprising twist or unexpected element (e.g., the response of the father in the parable of the prodigal son would've totally surprised Jesus's hearers; the growth of the mustard seed into a plant big enough to accommodate nesting birds is NOT what mustard seeds usually do—this is a supernatural plant!).
4. Jesus's parables are often pointedly addressed to his original audience. Don't miss the context of the parables: is Jesus responding to a question? Is he trying to correct a misunderstanding among his followers or his opponents? Is he speaking to humble sinners? Is he condemning wicked Pharisees? We should avoid “parachute readings” where we just drop down in the middle of the parable. When we look at what Matthew writes in the context *leading up* to each parable, and *afterward*, this helps us understand the parable itself.
5. Parables often paint a picture that makes *one main point*. Not every parable Jesus tells is an allegory, where *every* detail is symbolic (like in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*). In light of this, we shouldn't rush to assign a “spiritual” meaning to every detail in a parable, unless we have good reasons to do so. Rather, we should consider how all the details together paint a picture or tell a story that communicates an overall truth about the kingdom of heaven. For example, in Jesus's parable about the treasure hidden in a field (Matthew 13:44), there is no reason to think the “field” represents something in particular. The overall point is how valuable the kingdom of heaven is!

However, in some parables (like the parable of the four soils or the parable of the wedding banquet), many of the details are symbolic. As a general rule of thumb, “let Scripture interpret Scripture.” If you have a hunch that some detail in a parable is symbolic, look for other passages that use the same or similar imagery, or look for confirmation in passages before and after the parable.

6. Parables—at least Jesus's parables—require spiritual insight to profit their hearers. Let's examine that a bit more in the next section.

The Purpose of the Parables

On the one hand, it's clear that Jesus used parables as a teaching tool. He wanted his hearers to learn more about the kingdom of God. Parables provide vivid and memorable object lessons that help us to picture, digest, and remember key truths of life in God's kingdom.

But Jesus also made it clear that another reason he used parables was to make it *hard* for some people to understand his teaching! They revealed *and* concealed. This may be surprising, but he was quite blunt about it:

Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."

In v. 13, Jesus says "This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." In other words, Jesus seems to be saying that one reason he uses parables is to expose the difference between those who are spiritually alive and those who are spiritually dead and disinterested in the things of God.

People naturally love stories. So parables are inherently interesting to people. At the same time, though, parables require curiosity, reflection, and perhaps follow-up questions to fruitfully grasp and apply. So it is not surprising to find that it is Jesus's disciples—those "to whom it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven"—who are curious enough to come and ask Jesus to explain his parables. Those who want to know seek—and Jesus helps them "see." Those who don't want to know just move on. This is in fact one of the points Jesus makes in this very parable: "*When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path*" (Matthew 13:19).

For those whose eyes are opened to the value of learning from Jesus, though, parables are one part of how he grows our faith and bears fruit in our lives: "*As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty*" (13:23).

The Kingdom of Heaven

To fully appreciate the emphasis in Matthew's Gospel on "the kingdom of heaven" (which is just another way of saying what Luke and Mark call "the kingdom of God") would require a much longer introduction! But it's important to grasp key elements of this Gospel's teaching about God's kingdom in order to appreciate that Jesus specifically connects the parables to knowing "the secrets of the kingdom of heaven" (13:11). He also starts many of his parables by saying "The kingdom of heaven is like..."

So—besides what the parables reveal—what do we see in Matthew's Gospel about this kingdom of heaven?

1. A God-centered kingdom

The kingdom is not a geographical location, bordered by walls or national boundaries.

The kingdom of heaven is where the king of heaven is.

The kingdom of heaven had come in the person of Jesus (Matthew 3:2–3); this is the amazing "gospel of the kingdom" (Matthew 4:23) that Jesus proclaimed and Matthew wrote his Gospel to affirm.

From the way Matthew begins his gospel with a royal genealogy of Christ, it's clear that the focus in this kingdom is on the king and what he has come to teach, to do, and to call people to.

And here is perhaps the most striking reality that Christians come to embrace by faith: this is a kingdom where the king is always present with every one of his people (see Matthew 28:20)!

2. A personal kingdom

In Matthew's Gospel (and this is clear in the rest of the Gospels), you cannot ignore this kingdom or be apathetic to its king. You are either a son of the kingdom or an enemy of the king.

To put it another way, the kingdom is about a Person (God)—and the arrival of the king demands a personal response. You cannot be neutral about Jesus (see Matthew 12:30).

At the same time, it is only through the grace and power of the king himself, opening blind eyes and giving repentance and faith, that sinners can enter into the kingdom through a saving relationship with its king (Colossians 1:14).

3. A growing kingdom

The kingdom of heaven has to do with the reign of God in the souls of men and women. So while it's true that God rules over everything, his rule and reign over people is most vividly displayed in the active trust and willing worship that his redeemed people live out as his church. Because this is the case, as God transforms more and more people through history and throughout the world, the kingdom of heaven is "growing."

4. A redemptive kingdom

Matthew's Gospel culminates with the death and resurrection of the king. This is vitally important to understanding the overall purpose of this account of Jesus's life and teaching. The kingdom of heaven is characterized by the *saving* work of the king—in both what he does *in* his people and what he does *for* his people. It's not first and foremost about changing society or about changing people's circumstances, but of changing their relationship with God.

This is what the angel Gabriel tells Joseph in the very first chapter: "*She [Mary] will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*" (v. 21).

In other words, the kingdom of God at core is not a matter of behavior, but of salvation. One does not enter the kingdom—become one of "his people"—through conforming to Christ's teachings, but through trusting in Christ.

Since this is the case, many self-styled "good people" will remain enemies of the kingdom; while the kingdom itself is filled with misfits! Since humble faith alone is the prerequisite for being joined to the king, "many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:30; see also 21:32).

5. A holy kingdom

Though one does not enter the kingdom through righteous behavior, those Christ brings into his kingdom are genuinely changed.

For those who belong to this king, being saved from sin is not just a matter of being forgiven, but of being transformed; his people are saved not just from sin's penalty, but also from its power.

Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) is a striking collection of Jesus's teachings on how those who are sons of God (5:9)—heirs of the kingdom (5:3)—are to conduct themselves! The kingdom of God is manifested now as the rule of Christ in the souls of people, so there is a sense in which the kingdom of heaven can be described in terms of learning to trust Christ and to obey everything he's commanded us (Matthew 28:20).

6. An already/not yet kingdom

The kingdom of heaven—that is, the rule of God—came to earth in a new, unique way with the incarnation and ministry of Christ. The power of the gospel and the influence of the Holy Spirit in and through the people of God has shaped history and changed the world in many ways. The kingdom of heaven is here already!

But it's clear that things are still not as they should be. That is because the kingdom of heaven is not *fully* here. It's begun, but it's not yet finalized. It's inaugurated, but not yet consummated. The Son has purchased his bride—but the wedding feast has not yet begun (Matthew 22:1–14; 25:1–13)!

Matthew's Gospel itself indicates this in countless ways. Jesus's teaching about his return in chapters 24 and 25, for example, makes it plain that the kingdom has yet to take its final form:

The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear. (Matthew 13:41–43)

And so Christians live in the in-between: we live in the already-but-not-yet kingdom. For now, the reign of Christ is primarily evident through his powerful and loving rule (and spread, Matthew 24:14) of his church and the individual members of it. But we await That Day, when the return of Christ makes the reign of Christ public and uncontested, when his justice is fully vindicated through the judgment of his enemies, and when his transforming power extends beyond his work in our hearts to renew the entire creation.

For now, we walk in worship of our king, in obedience to his final commission, and we trust in his astounding promise:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:16–20)

Applying the Parables to Ourselves

Jesus told his parables to reveal truths about the kingdom of heaven (especially about its king!). But he also told parables to expose the spiritual condition of his hearers. Any study of the parables should keep both things in view.

We can become overly personal in our study of the parables, assigning meanings to things that just happen to strike us without paying proper attention to what Jesus was trying to communicate about what his kingdom is like, about what *he* is like.

But we can also become overly “theological” in our study, avoiding the probing nature of Jesus’s words. His parables are intended to shine light on our hearts—to reveal where our allegiances lie, to expose where we place our trust, to question our views of God’s worth and God’s grace, to illuminate truths that we would be blessed to embrace, to examine our lives in this world in light of what Jesus teaches about life in the kingdom.

The only way to fruitful life in the kingdom is through humble, obedient faith in the king. In the studies that follow, you’ll notice that we do not apply the parables to ourselves until we have explored how they point to the saving work, sufficient grace, and good authority of Christ. Life in the kingdom—even repentance—comes through trust in the King.

SECTION 1: MATTHEW 13:1–9

*Pray. Read **Matthew 13:1–9**:*

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.”

Historical and literary context:

- 1) When does this occur in Jesus's ministry? What are some things his disciples understand about him already? What things are still unclear to them?

- 2) What do we know about the physical circumstances of this teaching? Why is Jesus in the boat, etc.?

- 3) Who is Jesus's audience? What can we assume about the nature of this crowd and their reasons for being there?

- 4) What have been some of the reactions Jesus has gotten to his teaching in this section of Matthew (chapters 11–12)?

- 5) What are the words, if any, you need to look up? Write down any definitions you find here. (You could look them up in other parts of the Bible or refer to a Bible dictionary or commentary.)

- 6) How does this parable fit into the rest of the chapter? Are there upcoming sections that seem particularly relevant or are clearly related to it?

- 7) Does the scene Jesus describes in this parable match or differ from the "everyday experiences" of his hearers? Are there any details that seem like they might be a "twist" on what people would normally expect? Use a Bible dictionary or commentary to look up farming techniques in New Testament times.

- 8) Notice that this is the first of Jesus's parables recorded in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus himself identifies it as a key parable, an entry-point into all his teaching (see Mark 4:13 and Luke 8:9–10). So a good amount of attention should be given to Jesus's discussion and explanation of this parable in vv. 10–23. In what way(s) might Jesus's teaching here serve as a key to understanding all the parables?

- 1) Two thousand years of church history have tried and proven the truth of Christ's teachings. What are similarities and differences between the situation when Jesus first taught this parable and where we stand as Christians after his death, resurrection, and ascension?
- 2) Is any part of this parable or its explanation a reference to other Scriptures? If so, look them up and see how they shed light on or reinforce Jesus's teaching here (a reference Bible can help you identify connections with other Scriptures).
- 3) Are there any references to the gospel—the person and work of **Christ**? The power and work of the **Holy Spirit**? The goodness and plan of the **Father**? Which aspect of the gospel seems most prominent?
- 4) What does this parable show about “the king” and his character, his work, his ways, his will? About people's relationship or response to him?
- 5) How does this parable highlight our need for the king?
- 6) Which aspect or aspects of the kingdom of heaven prominent in Matthew's Gospel are at the forefront of this parable? (See introduction, pages iv-vi.)
- 7) Try to sum up the meaning and application of this passage with reference to Christ by using the following phrase to get started; include Christ in your summary sentence:
“Jesus wants you to see that...and to respond by...”

Reflect on and then discuss answers to some or all of the following questions:

- 1) How does this parable challenge or confirm my understanding (of God, the gospel, salvation, humans, sin, etc.)?
- 2) What is most encouraging about it?
- 3) How do I see elements of all four “soils” in my life—past and present?
- 4) In what ways does this passage lead me to consider my need for Christ and who Christ is for me?
- 5) In this passage, what is Jesus calling me to...
 - believe?
 - repent of?
 - feel or do?
- 6) What promises or pictures does it use to motivate trust and obedience? What promises or pictures does it use to warn of disobedience?
- 7) How does this passage inform or direct how I relate to
 - my church?
 - other believers?
 - the world?

8) If it helps you, draw an illustration of the parable reflecting the key things you've learned in your study and application.

9) Sum up the application of this passage using the blank to identify those whom the passage most directly addresses. For this particular parable, you might want to write multiple versions of this sentence for different types of "soil."

Build on your answer to question 7 from the previous section. Include Christ in your answer.

*"Jesus wants those who [or "wants me..."] _____ to know that... **and to respond by...**"*

Pray.

SECTION 2: MATTHEW 18:21–35

*Pray. Read **Matthew 18:21–35**:*

Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

Historical and literary context:

- 1) When does this occur in Jesus's ministry? What are some things his disciples understand about him already? What things are still unclear to them?
- 2) What prompts Jesus to tell this parable? Make some observations about what's behind the question Jesus is asked.
- 3) Who is Jesus speaking to when he originally tells the parable? Does Jesus specify who the parable particularly applies to?
- 4) What are some of the major developments in what Jesus has shown and taught in the chapters leading up to this (chapters 17–18)?
- 5) What are the words, if any, you need to look up? Write down any definitions you find here.
(You could look them up in other parts of the Bible or refer to a Bible dictionary or commentary.)
- 6) How does this parable fit into the rest of the chapter? Are there preceding or upcoming sections that seem particularly relevant or are clearly related to it? How do they relate?
- 7) Does the scene Jesus describes in this parable match or differ from the “everyday experiences” of his hearers? Are there any details that seem like they might be a “twist” on what people would normally expect? Use a Bible dictionary or commentary to look up technical terms (e.g., “talents”).

- 1) Who are the major characters in the parable? What are other main details or significant “items” in the parable? Briefly describe them. If any of the characters are symbolic (e.g., the king represents somebody...), identify them.

- 2) How is the parable introduced by Matthew? How does Jesus conclude the parable? If he provides a summary or interpretation of the parable, what is it?

- 3) What is the major image in the parable? Why is this image or illustration particularly helpful in illuminating Jesus’s point?

- 4) If the surrounding context in these chapters sheds light on this parable, summarize what the context helps clarify:

- 5) What surprises or “twists” are there, if any? What does this draw our attention to?

- 6) Try to capture the main point of the parable in your own words—what was Jesus saying to his original hearers?

The kingdom of heaven is...

- 1) Two thousand years of church history have tried and proven the truth of Christ's teachings. What are similarities and differences between the situation when Jesus first taught this parable and where we stand as Christians after his death, resurrection, and ascension?
- 2) Is any part of this parable or its explanation a reference to other Scriptures? If so, look them up and see how they shed light on or reinforce Jesus's teaching here (a reference Bible can help you identify connections with other Scriptures).
- 3) Are there other Scripture passages that address this same issue from a different angle, or with more clarity? What are they and what do they help clarify?
- 4) Are there any major doctrines that this parable reinforces? Are there any that it seems hard to reconcile with? What are some possible ways this parable could fit in with such doctrines?
- 5) Are there any allusions to the gospel—the person and work of **Christ?** The power and work of the **Holy Spirit?** The goodness and plan of the **Father?** Which aspect of the gospel seems most prominent?
- 6) What does this parable show about the king and his character, his work, his ways, his will? About people's relationship or response to him?
- 7) How does this parable highlight our need for the king?
- 8) Which aspect or aspects of the kingdom of heaven prominent in Matthew's Gospel are at the forefront of this parable? (See introduction, pages iv-vi.)
- 9) Try to sum up the meaning and application of this passage with reference to Christ by using the following phrase to get started; include Christ in your summary sentence:
"Jesus wants you to see that...and to respond by..."

Reflect on and then discuss answers to some or all of the following questions:

- 1) How does this parable challenge or confirm my understanding (of God, the gospel, salvation, humans, sin, etc.)?
- 2) What is most encouraging about it?
- 3) What misconceptions about life in God's kingdom might this parable particularly address?
- 4) What spiritual conditions does this parable directly explore?
- 5) In what ways does this passage lead me to consider my need for Christ? How does this passage point me to Jesus's sufficiency for me? How does it point to his authority over me?
- 6) What is Jesus calling me to...
 - believe?
 - repent of?
 - feel or do?

What do I find particularly hard about this calling? What particular relationship in my life does this passage most directly address?

- 7) What promises or pictures does it use to motivate trust and obedience? What promises or pictures does it use to warn of disobedience?
- 8) How does the description of the king's reaction in this parable challenge/encourage us?

- 9) How does this passage inform or direct how I relate to...
- God through Jesus?
 - my church?
 - other believers?
 - the world?
- 10) What are specific ways my church community should be challenged and/or encouraged through this?
How can I/we contribute to making that happen?
- 11) If it helps you, draw an illustration of the parable reflecting the key things you've learned in your study and application.
- 12) Sum up the application of this passage using the blank to identify those whom the passage most directly addresses. Build on your answer to question 9 from the previous section.

“Jesus wants those who [or “wants me...”]_____to know that...and to respond by...”

Pray.

SESSION 3: MATTHEW 20:1–16

*Pray. Read **Matthew 20:1–16**:*

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Historical and literary context:

- 1) When does this occur in Jesus's ministry? What are some things his disciples understand about him already? What things are still unclear to them?

- 2) Who is Jesus speaking to when he originally tells the parable? Does Jesus specify or hint who the parable particularly applies to in his original context?

- 3) What prompts Jesus to tell this parable? Look at the surrounding context before and after this section. What are some of the truths he's trying to open his disciples' eyes to?

- 4) How does this parable fit into the rest of the chapter? Are there preceding or upcoming sections that seem particularly relevant or are clearly related to it? What purpose does this parable serve in the overall structure?

- 5) What are the words, if any, you need to look up? Write down any definitions you find here.
(You could look them up in other parts of the Bible or refer to a Bible dictionary or commentary.)

- 6) Does the scene Jesus describes in this parable match or differ from the "everyday experiences" of his hearers? Are there any details that seem like they might be a "twist" on what people would normally expect? Use a Bible dictionary or commentary to look up technical terms (e.g., "denarius").

- 1) Who are the major characters in the parable? What are other main details or significant “items” in the parable? Briefly describe them. If any of the characters or details seem symbolic, who or what do you think they symbolize?
- 2) How is the parable introduced by Matthew? How does Jesus conclude the parable? If he provides a summary or interpretation of the parable, what is it?
- 3) What is the major image in the parable? Why is this image or illustration particularly helpful in illuminating Jesus’s point?
- 4) If the surrounding context in these chapters sheds light on this parable, summarize what the context helps clarify:
- 5) What surprises or “twists” are there, if any? What does this draw our attention to?
- 6) Is there a specific doctrine you’d say this parable is illustrating? What are other passages that provide additional discussion of the doctrine?
- 7) Try to capture the main point of the parable in your own words—what was Jesus saying to his original hearers?

The kingdom of heaven is...

- 1) Two thousand years of church history have tried and proven the truth of Christ's teachings. What are similarities and differences between the situation when Jesus first taught this parable and where we stand as Christians after his death, resurrection, and ascension?
- 2) Is any part of this parable or its explanation a reference to other Scriptures? If so, look them up and see how they shed light on or reinforce Jesus's teaching here (a reference Bible can help you identify connections with other Scriptures).
- 3) Are there other Scripture passages that address this same issue from a different angle, or with more clarity? What are they and what do they help clarify?
- 4) Are there any major doctrines that this parable reinforces? Are there any that it seems hard to reconcile with? What are some possible ways this parable could fit in with such doctrines?
- 5) Are there any allusions to the gospel—the person and work of **Christ?** The power and work of the **Holy Spirit?** The goodness and plan of the **Father?** Which aspect of the gospel seems most prominent?
- 6) What does this parable show about the king and his character, his work, his ways, his will? About people's relationship or response to him?
- 7) How does this parable highlight our need for the king?
- 8) Which aspect or aspects of the kingdom of heaven prominent in Matthew's Gospel are at the forefront of this parable? (See introduction, pages iv-vi.)
- 9) Try to sum up the meaning and application of this passage with reference to Christ by using the following phrase to get started; include Christ in your summary sentence:
"Jesus wants you to see that...and to respond by..."

Reflect on and then discuss answers to some or all of the following questions:

- 1) What is most challenging/convicting about this parable? What is most encouraging?
- 2) How does this parable challenge or confirm my understanding (of God, the gospel, salvation, humans, sin, etc.)? What are some questions I have?
- 3) What misconceptions about life in God's kingdom might this parable particularly address?
- 4) What spiritual conditions does this parable directly address?
- 5) In what ways does this passage lead me to consider my need for Christ? How does this passage point me to Jesus's sufficiency for me? How does it point to his authority over me?
- 6) What is Jesus calling me to...
 - believe?
 - repent of?
 - feel or do?

What do I find particularly hard about this calling?

- 7) How does this passage inform or direct how I relate to...
 - God through Jesus?
 - my church?
 - other believers?
 - the world?

8) What are specific ways my church community should be challenged and/or encouraged through this? How can I/we contribute to making that happen?

9) How might this passage particularly help a Christian who is...

- straying?
- idle?
- fainthearted?
- weak?
- suffering?

(These categories are mostly drawn from 1 Thessalonians 5:14.)

Which is most relevant to you right now?

10) If it helps you, draw an illustration of the parable reflecting the key things you've learned in your study and application.

11) Sum up the application of this passage using the blank to identify those whom the passage most directly addresses. Build on your answer to question 9 from the previous section. Include Christ in your answer.

“Jesus wants those who [or “wants me...”]_____to know that...and to respond by...”

Pray.

SESSION 4: MATTHEW 22:1–14

*Pray. Read **Matthew 22:1–14**:*

And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, ‘See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.’” But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.’ And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Historical and literary context:

- 1) When does this occur in Jesus's ministry? What key events in his ministry have recently taken place? What key events are around the corner?

- 2) Who is Jesus speaking to when he originally tells the parable? Does Jesus specify who the parable particularly applies to?

- 3) What are the words, if any, you need to look up? Write down any definitions you find here. (You could look them up in other parts of the Bible or refer to a Bible dictionary or commentary.)

- 4) What prompts Jesus to tell this parable? Make some observations about the emphasis of the nearby chapters.

- 5) How does this parable fit into the rest of the chapter? Are there preceding or upcoming sections that seem particularly relevant or are clearly related to it? How do they relate?

- 6) Does the scene Jesus describes in this parable match or differ from the "everyday experiences" of his hearers? Are there any details that seem like they might be a "twist" on what people would normally expect? Use a Bible dictionary or commentary to look up terms or customs that might be unfamiliar (e.g., things related to wedding invitations in the ancient Near East).

- 1) Who are the major characters in the parable? What are other main details or significant “items” in the parable? Briefly describe them. If any of the characters or details seem symbolic, who or what do you think they symbolize?
- 2) How is the parable introduced by Matthew? How does Jesus conclude the parable? If he provides a summary or interpretation of the parable, what is it?
- 3) What are the major divisions of the parable? Does each section have a distinct point its making? If so, how do the different sections relate to each other? How do they differ in emphasis?
- 4) What is the major image in the parable? Why is this image or illustration particularly helpful in illuminating Jesus’s point?
- 5) If anything in the surrounding context in these chapters sheds light on this parable, summarize what the context helps clarify:
- 6) What surprises or “twists” are there, if any? What does this draw our attention to?
- 7) Is there a specific doctrine you’d say this parable is illustrating? What are other passages that provide additional discussion of the doctrine?
- 8) Try to capture the main point of the parable in your own words—what was Jesus saying to his original hearers?

The kingdom of heaven is...

- 1) Two thousand years of church history have tried and proven the truth of Christ's teachings. What are similarities and differences between the situation when Jesus first taught this parable and where we stand as Christians after his death, resurrection, and ascension?
- 2) Is any part of this parable or its explanation a reference to other Scriptures? If so, look them up and see how they shed light on or reinforce Jesus's teaching here (a reference Bible can help you identify connections with other Scriptures).
- 3) Are there other Scripture passages that address this same issue from a different angle, or with more clarity? What are they and what do they help clarify?
- 4) Are there any major doctrines that this parable reinforces? What are they? What questions does this raise for you, and what other Scriptures might help clarify the answer?
- 5) Are there any allusions to the gospel—the person and work of **Christ?** The power and work of the **Holy Spirit?** The goodness and plan of the **Father?** Which aspect of the gospel seems most prominent?
- 6) What does this parable show about the king and his character, his work, his ways, his will? About people's relationship or response to him?
- 7) How does this parable highlight people's need for the king?
- 8) Which aspect or aspects of the kingdom of heaven prominent in Matthew's Gospel are at the forefront of this parable? (See introduction, pages iv-vi.)
- 9) Try to sum up the meaning and application of this passage with reference to Christ by using the following phrase to get started; include Christ in your summary sentence:
"Jesus wants us to see that...and to respond by..."

Reflect on and then discuss answers to some or all of the following questions:

- 1) What is most challenging/convicting about this parable? What is most encouraging?
- 2) How does this parable challenge or confirm my understanding (of God, the gospel, salvation, humans, sin, etc.)? What are some questions I have?
- 3) What misconceptions about life in God's kingdom might this parable particularly address?
- 4) What spiritual conditions does this parable directly address?
- 5) In what ways does this passage lead me to consider my need for Christ? How does this passage point me to Jesus's sufficiency for me? How does it point to his authority over me?
- 6) What is Jesus calling me to...
 - believe?
 - repent of?
 - feel or do?

What do I find particularly hard about this calling?
- 7) What promises or pictures does this passage use to motivate trust and obedience? What promises or pictures does it use to warn of faithlessness or disobedience?
- 8) How does this passage inform or direct the way I relate to...
 - God through Jesus?
 - my church?
 - other believers?
 - the world?

9) What are specific ways my church community should be challenged and/or encouraged through this?
How can I/we contribute to making that happen?

10) How might this passage particularly help a Christian who is...

- straying?
- idle?
- fainthearted?
- weak?
- suffering?

(These categories are mostly drawn from 1 Thessalonians 5:14.)

Which is most relevant to you right now?

11) If it helps you, draw an illustration of the parable reflecting the key things you've learned in your study and application.

12) Sum up the application of this passage using the blank to identify those whom the passage most directly addresses. Build on your answer to question 9 from the previous section. Include Christ in your answer.

*“Jesus wants those who [or “wants me...”] _____ to know that... **and to respond by...**”*

Pray

- 1) Summarize each parable in one or two sentences, using images Jesus uses in each parable:
 - a. Matthew 13:1–9: The kingdom of heaven is...
 - b. Matthew 18:21–35: The kingdom of heaven is...
 - c. Matthew 20:1–16: The kingdom of heaven is...
 - d. Matthew 22:1–14: The kingdom of heaven is...

- 2) Answer the following question for each parable:
 - a. Matthew 13:1–9: What does this parable show me about my king?
 - b. Matthew 18:21–25: What does this parable show me about my king?
 - c. Matthew 20:1–16: What does this parable show me about my king?
 - d. Matthew 22:1–14: What does this parable show me about my king?

- 3) What truths from these four parables must you reorient your life around and how?

- 4) What truths from these parables will you rest in and how?

- 5) What means of growth will you pursue in response?

- 6) Write a modern-day parable that illustrates a truth about the kingdom of heaven. It can be the same point made by one of the parables you've studied, or a different point drawn from Scripture. Here are some tips that might help:
 - Remember to focus on one aspect of life in the kingdom, like the nature of the king and his ways, a type of response or responses people have to him (and the results), or an illustration of how we enter or walk in his kingdom.
 - Remember to draw from common, everyday life experiences.
 - Consider including a surprising twist or unlikely element that highlights the counter-intuitive and supernatural nature of Christ's kingdom.
 - Everything in the parable doesn't have to be symbolic.

- 7) Write a prayer of adoration, confession, thanks, and supplication to God based on the parables you've studied.

Pray.

APPENDIX: SIMPLIFIED QUESTIONS

(Adapted from *One-to-One Bible Reading*, by David Helm, pp. 47–48, 58–59)

For each segment of the study, you can use the following questions to guide your personal or group study:

Context:

- What sort of writing is this? (A letter, a narrative, a poem?)
- Are there any clues about the circumstances under which it was written?
- What has happened so far?

Observation:

- What do you learn about the main characters in this section? How does the author describe them?
- What images or metaphors does the author use? What do they indicate about God or the other people in the text? What might they indicate about modern readers?
- What is the main point or points?
- What surprises are there?
- What are the key words? What words or ideas are repeated?

Meaning:

- How does this text relate to other parts of the book?
- How does the passage relate to Jesus?
- What does this passage reveal about who Jesus is and what he came into the world to do?
- What does this teach us about God?
- How could we sum up the meaning of this passage in our own words?

Application:

- How does this passage challenge (or confirm) my understanding?
- Is there some attitude I need to change?
- How does this passage call on me to change the way I live?
- What does this passage teach me about being a disciple of Jesus?
- How does this passage point you to Jesus's sufficiency for you? How does it point to his authority over you?

