

Gospels: Lesson Six,
Christ's Teaching Ministry: Parables and Stories
Matthew 13; Luke 10, 15; John 10

Subject: As many began rejecting Jesus and His teachings, Jesus started teaching in parables and stories.

Main Idea: Jesus' parables reveal what God is like, how He acts, and what He expects of His people.

Principles:

1. *Despite the great value and influence of the Kingdom, not all will receive it and enter in.*
2. *The Kingdom of Heaven and true life are only found in Jesus.*
3. *Kingdom members have converted hearts.*
4. *God loves the lost and rejoices when they enter His Kingdom.*

Introduction

This is our third and final lesson in Matthew 11-17. As previously mentioned, these chapters cover the transition in Jesus' ministry that occurred due to growing opposition. Matthew 13 indicates that one result of the opposition was that Jesus did not teach in synagogues as frequently as before. Beginning in this chapter, He is more often found teaching outdoors. A second result of growing opposition indicated in Matthew 13 was a change in Jesus' teaching method from straightforward instruction to teaching in parables. Jesus did not invent parabolic teaching; He just made use of a traditional method that was already widely used in first-century Judaism.

We should make a distinction between the reason Jesus spoke in parables and the aim of His parables. The *reason* Jesus spoke in parables is given in Matthew 13 and we will look at that in a moment. Jesus' *aim* in speaking in parables was to reveal what God is like, how He acts, and what He expects. Close to 100 verses in the Old and New Testament speak of knowing the Lord or God being revealed. The writer of Hebrews tells us, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets... but in these last days *He has spoken to us* by His Son... The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the *exact representation of His being*..." (Hebrews 1:1-3). In other words, the Old Testament scriptures do not contain God's full self-revelation. If we really want to know God, we must look at Jesus and listen to Jesus. Many of Jesus' parables develop truths, the seed of which was planted in the Old Testament but not brought to maturity until the advent of Christ. The *aim* of His parables was to help those with receptive hearts know *more fully* what God is like, how He acts, and what He expects, and then to challenge them to respond.

If we are to respond to the parable's truths, we should consider the question of how they are to be interpreted. This is a subject that Bible students have debated for centuries and we can learn a great deal by considering the various methods that have been used.

I. General Information on Parables

A. History of Interpretation

- i. Allegorical Approach The great fourth-century theologian Augustine took an allegorical approach in which every detail has significance. A classic example is his interpretation of the Good Samaritan. He believed Christ is the Good Samaritan, the inn is the church, and the innkeeper is the apostle Paul, not to speak of many other details that he considered symbolic. These ideas sound good, but the trouble is that they have nothing to do with Christ's intention in relating the account. Such an approach will invariably lead us to conclusions beyond those Jesus intended. This is not to say that Jesus never used allegory (the Gate and the Good Shepherd of John 10 are allegorical illustrations) but rather that we should avoid trying to turn every detail into a symbol.
- ii. Adolph Jülicher's Approach: Near the end of the 19th century, a German scholar named Adolph Jülicher changed the way parables were viewed. Although some of his interpretative methods have since been discarded, the strength of his approach was that he rejected allegorizing. Jülicher claimed that all parables have only one main point. This is a helpful principle, even though it is probably too simplistic for some parables.
- iii. Historical Approach: In the twentieth century, some scholars began emphasizing the importance of the cultural and historical context in which the parables were originally told. Unfortunately, many of these scholars doubted the authenticity of the Gospel records and thus sought out various, unnecessary procedures to recover the parables' original intent. While it is true that the key to understanding a parable is often found in the context, discovering that context is not as difficult as these scholars made it out to be. All the evidence supports the reliability of the Gospel records, and often the verses surrounding the parable provide the very context needed to interpret it. The parables had meaning for Jesus' audience and, so far as we are able, that meaning must be discovered.
- iv. Modern Approach: More recently, scholars have emphasized the importance of applying the parables to today's readers. However, some have carried this too far; in investigating the parables as art forms, they suggest that in addition to the original meaning, there can be any number of further possible meanings. Although the value of applying the parables to our present day lives can hardly be underestimated, Jesus' parables had meaning for His audience and so far as we are able, we must discover *that* meaning. The fact that they tell what God is like, how He acts, and what He expects of us is proof enough that they apply to our present lives. Westerners are rarely aware of the degree to which their culture teaches them to "think for themselves." However, using creativity is dangerous when interpreting the scriptures and usually leads to error.

B. The Parables and the Kingdom of Heaven

- i. Kingdom Theme: In Lesson 1, we learned that the Kingdom of Heaven is a major theme in Matthew. Many of Jesus' parables focus on His Kingdom, directly addressing the character of the Kingdom, the character of the King, the character of the King's subjects, indictments against the King's enemies (who, in Jesus' day, were the Jewish religious leaders), and Kingdom interests (such as prayer, faithfulness, obedience, loving one's neighbor, or the use or abuse of wealth). Jesus' Kingdom is both present and future. Although it is invisible to us today, Christ's Kingdom has existed spiritually (in His rule in the lives of Kingdom members) since His first advent. However, His kingdom will be brought to completion and perfection when He returns and after that, Jesus will literally and visibly reign over us. Forces that oppose His Kingdom are being subjected and will one day be completely overthrown in a final battle. Those familiar with the Bible today may take such truths for granted, but these things were not at all clear before the New Testament was written. Jesus revealed many of these Kingdom truths in His parables, such as the collection in Matthew 13, and on some occasions had to privately clarify their meaning to His disciples. They lived in the very beginning of this era we know as the "Church Age" and had not yet witnessed certain Kingdom happenings that we know about today. For example, we can see from the history in the Book of Acts – and since that time – that the Kingdom started small but grew and grew, just as the Parable of the Mustard Seed depicts.
- ii. Confusion Over the Parables: This leads to the question of why Jesus chose to use parables at all. According to Matthew 13:11-17 and Mark 4:10-12, Jesus explained His reason by quoting a passage in Isaiah (6:9-10) that speaks of those who hear without understanding and see without perceiving. He told His disciples that they were blessed because their "eyes" see and their "ears" hear (Matthew 13:16). What does this tell us about Jesus' reason for speaking in parables? Scholars are divided primarily between two opinions.
 1. Jesus may have been saying that He chose to speak in parables so that those whose hearts were too calloused to understand spiritual truth *could understand more easily*. This interpretation is supported by the facts that 1) parables clarify truth, 2) physically speaking, everyone has ears and Jesus said, "*He who has ears, let him hear*" (Matthew 13:9), and 3) God desires to turn and heal all who are willing (Matthew 13:15). If this is what Jesus intended, then the quote from Isaiah is about the response His disciples should expect to their presentation of truth, not about a preprogrammed determination.

2. An alternate interpretation of Jesus' meaning is that He spoke in parables in order to *prevent the "outsiders"* (Mark 4:11) *from perceiving spiritual gems of truth*, a kind of judgment on those who had refused to believe in Him. In other words, they could have believed and "heard," but once they repeatedly hardened their hearts to Jesus' message, God's judgment fell so that they no longer were able to understand. For to have "ears" is a metaphor for listening with a receptive spirit. In John 17, Jesus said He revealed the Father to "those whom the Father gave [Him]" (17:6). Therefore, the "secrets" or "mysteries" of the Kingdom were understandable only to those whose sincerely sought truth and were willing to ponder them without prejudice. Yet, was this kind of judgment not also a mercy, since the more knowledge of God we possess, the more accountable we will be for how we have responded on the final Day of Judgment?

II. The Parables of Matthew 13

A. The Parable of the Sower and the Soils: Farming was a common enterprise to Jesus' audience, so it is not surprising that He used illustrations from farming to explain the Kingdom of Heaven. In the case of the Parable of the Sower and the Soils, there is no doubt about its meaning because Jesus gave it to His disciples (13:18-23). In this parable, Jesus compared the human heart to various types of soil.

- i. Hard Soil: The first is un-groomed soil such as that which existed on the well-trodden paths between the rows of crops (13:4). As a farmer walked along these while sewing seed by hand, some of the seed would end up on this hard ground. Birds came and snatched up the seed before it had any opportunity to germinate. The seed represents God's truth. This kind of soil represents hearers who never receive truth at all (13:19). Their hearts have grown hard by repeated trampling of truth, especially with regard to conviction of sin. The birds represent Satan and his demonic accomplices who quickly snatch away the seed.
- ii. Rocky Soil: Rocks dominate the second type of soil (13:5). At first, the seed germinates. However, the rocky ground below the topsoil prevents it from taking root. The response of the person represented by this kind of soil is deceptive. It represents hearers who like what they hear but never count the cost of implementing it. They are enthusiastic about Jesus' teachings initially, but since they have no root, they fall away when trials come (13:20-21). They are superficial. Some people run after anything new and different but lack the deep inner strength that only comes from meditation on God's word and application of it to daily living. Thus, they are unable to stand when their faith is tested.

- iii. Thorny Soil: The third soil is infested with thorns (13:2). It represents hearers who receive the truth but never mature (13:22). Their response is also deceptive. It appears they have received the seed, but their life is so cluttered with activities and preoccupied by other loves that they don't have time for the habits that would have grounded them in their faith and ultimately, they produce no fruit. On another occasion, Jesus said that a man cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). When our interests are divided, little by little the weeds will choke out interest in the Gospel.
- iv. Good Soil: Fourthly, the good soil (v13:8) represents hearers who receive the truth and change their life accordingly (13:23). This soil is interesting for two reasons. First, it does not produce the expected harvest yield but a surprisingly fruitful one: a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown. Secondly, we see some hearts with good soil produce more fruit than others. Perhaps Jesus intended for us to simply understand that some believers are more spectacular, while others are more ordinary. However, since Jesus' parables require an examination and judgment on one's own heart, a call to action, perhaps the more fruitful crops represent those who respond in obedience to God's word more quickly and eagerly.
- v. Application of the Parable: This parable explained the reason why so many rejected Jesus' message, even while a few received it. The parable prepared Jesus' disciples, as His ambassadors, that not everyone would receive the news and enter the Kingdom. Awaiting the results of planted seeds requires patience. Teachers and preachers should not be overly discouraged by the limited response to the Gospel. Secondly, the parable challenges us to judge our response to God's word. If it is half-hearted or superficial, we have reason for concern about our salvation. The New Testament knows nothing of half-hearted faith.

B. Parable of the Weeds

- i. Elements in the Parable: This parable describes weeds growing among wheat and a future separation of the two at the time of harvest. The weeds (sometimes translated "tares") is the Greek word for darnel seeds. In the early stages, these seeds look like wheat. However, darnel is very bitter and slightly poisonous. If an enemy wanted to destroy a crop, he would secretly scattered darnel seed among the good seed that was planted.

- ii. Explanation of the Parable: In verses 36-43, Jesus explained this parable. Jesus is the sower of the seed. This fact is important in understanding that the parables cover the time beginning with Jesus' first advent. The field is the world, the good seed are Kingdom people and the weeds are the sons of the evil one that were sown by the enemy, the devil. The harvest refers to the end of the age, the time of Jesus' second coming, and the harvesters are angels. Thus, the parables cover the time between Christ's first advent and His second advent, when He returns to judge the world.
- iii. Application of the Parable: This parable ends with some of Jesus' most sobering words. Those who are not Kingdom members will be thrown "into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (13:42). The parable helped Jesus' disciples see that His Kingdom was not yet all that it would be, a new concept for them, a mystery that was not clearly revealed in the Old Testament. Judgment would come but not yet. It also teaches that the devil plants counterfeits among true believers and distinguishing the two is not always simple. The Old Testament has little to say about Satan directly. In the New Testament, doctrines concerning him are progressively revealed so that by the time we reach the Book of Revelation, we begin to fully grasp his evil nature, intentions, and impact. To Jesus' disciples, the teachings in Jesus' parables concerning Satan were new ideas.

- C. Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast:** These two parables reveal truths about the growth of Christ's Kingdom. Although it would start very small and unimpressively (a group numbering about 120, according to Acts 1:15), it would grow to become something no one could ignore.
- D. Parables of the Hidden Treasure and Pearl:** These two parables teach one and the same idea. Some understand the man who sold all to gain the treasure to be Jesus, who so valued us, His treasure, that He gave His life for us. Others understand the parables to say that the Kingdom is of inestimable worth to Kingdom members. Either way, the parables teach that the Kingdom is of such value, no sacrifice is too great or must stand in the way of it.
- E. Parable of the Net:** The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was let down into a lake and caught good fish as well as bad ones. The fisherman pulled it ashore and threw out the bad fish. Jesus gave a partial interpretation of this parable, explaining it concerns the end of the age, when the angels will sort out the wicked from the righteous and cast the wicked into the blazing furnace of hell, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. This parable resembles the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds, emphasizing the certainty of future judgment, the safekeeping of the righteous, and the punishment of the wicked.

F. Teachers of the Law: Jesus concluded His teaching by telling His disciples that every teacher of the Law who becomes a member of His Kingdom is endowed with the ability to draw out the meaning of the Old Testament and show how its truths apply to the new age.

Summary Statement: The Kingdom parables in Matthew 13 presented Jesus' disciples with new information about the Church Age.

Principle: *Despite the great value and influence of the Kingdom, not all will receive it and enter in.*

The Jews not only understood themselves to be uniquely favored by God, they also believed that God's promises to Abraham guaranteed them a place in the Kingdom the prophets foretold. Paul addressed this serious mistake when he wrote to the Romans: "But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (3:21-24).

There is no special group with automatic entrance into Christ's Kingdom. It does not matter what church affiliation one holds, what one's parents and grandparents believed or sacrificed, or one's nationality. Kingdom members are those whose own hearts are receptive to Jesus, God's Son.

While the Jews believed their political enemies would be overthrown at the Messiah's advent, Jesus taught that His enemies would include both Jews and Gentiles. Two kinds of people exist: not Jews and Gentiles, but Christ followers and non-Christ followers. All who have not entered Christ's Kingdom by faith will be thrown into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Application: Are you ready for judgment? The Bible does not teach we have further opportunities to enter the Kingdom after death. What does your response to the word of God indicate about the "soil" of your heart?

Transition: Jesus' parables tell us what God is like, how He acts, and what He expects of us. In John 10, Jesus revealed Himself as the True Shepherd, the Gate, and the Good Shepherd.

III. The True Shepherd, the Gate, and the Good Shepherd – John 10:1-16

Some argue that Jesus' teaching in John 10 is allegorical and not strictly parabolic. However, the term parable is used broadly in the scriptures. For example, in the Greek, Luke 4:23 calls the phrase "Physician, heal yourself" a "parable" (although most translators substitute the word "proverb"). Regardless, the illustrative teaching method Jesus used in John 10 reveals truths about the King, His enemies, and His relationship to members of the Kingdom. In the first verses, Jesus describes Himself as the true Shepherd. In the second section, He is the Gate. In the third, He is the Good Shepherd.

A. Context

- i. Middle Eastern Shepherding: Since shepherding was a common occupation in Jesus' day, the habits and practices of shepherds were familiar to Jesus' audience. Ancient Middle Eastern sheep were not raised for slaughter but for their wool. Therefore, their shepherd knows them all through their lifetime and an intimate relationship develops. "Eastern sheepfolds had only one door, which was either guarded by the shepherd himself when only one flock was there, or by a gatekeeper when several flocks were enclosed. In the latter case, the gatekeeper would know the shepherds. Thieves would be forced to enter by other means."ⁱ Certain pens had no door or gate, only a single opening in the high, circular or square enclosure. In this case, when the sheep entered the pen for the night, the shepherd lied down in front of the opening, thus becoming the gate."ⁱⁱ
- ii. John 9: No break exists between the words of Jesus in John 9:41 and John 10:1. Therefore, Jesus gave the parables of the Good Shepherd and the Gate immediately after the blind man, whom He had healed, was insulted and thrown out of the Temple by the Pharisees. John 10:1 begins, "Very truly I tell you Pharisees..." These religious leaders were the thieves and robbers who misled God's people. They were the hired hands who had been entrusted with caring for God's people but cared only for themselves. The parable was an indictment against them. The blind man recognized Jesus' voice to be the voice of the true Shepherd and refused to follow these "thieves and robbers."
- iii. Old Testament Shepherding Imagery: Shepherding imagery is used throughout the Old Testament, including Messianic prophecies. In Genesis, Jacob spoke of God as his Shepherd (Genesis 48:15, 49:24). In Numbers 27:17, Moses prayed before his death that the Lord would appoint a shepherd who would "go out and come in" before God's people. The Lord told David that he was to shepherd His people Israel (2 Samuel 5:2, Psalm 78:72); in fact, all of Israel's leaders were under a divine order to shepherd God's people (2 Samuel 7:7). In the beautiful 23rd Psalm,

David describes the Lord as his own Shepherd, a Shepherd who leads him to green pastures, guides him in paths of righteousness, and remains with him even in the darkest valleys. The Lord is the “one Shepherd” who gave the writers of the wisdom books their wisdom (Ecclesiastes 12:11). In the books of prophecy, Israel’s foolish teachers and leaders are senseless shepherds who led the Lord’s sheep astray, destroying and scattering them, because they cared only for themselves (Jeremiah 10:21, 23:1, 50:6; Ezekiel 34:8). The Lord’s anger burns against these shepherds (Zechariah 10:3). By contrast, the Lord’s “one Shepherd” (Messiah) tends the flock, gathering the lambs in His arms, and carrying them close to His heart (Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 37:24; Micah 5:4).

B. Truths about the True, Good Shepherd

- i. Entered through the Gate: In John 10:1-18, Jesus reveals a number of truths about Himself. First, He, the true Shepherd of the sheep, entered by the gate (10:1). Jesus was submissive to His Father. He came in fulfillment of prophecy and followed God’s plan in every detail. He is the true shepherd because He did things God’s way, not climbing over the fence to gain access to the sheep.
- ii. Intimacy with the Sheep: Second, Jesus the Shepherd has an intimate relationship with the sheep. They know His voice and follow Him. He leads them out to pasture. A hired hand, who does not own the sheep, does nothing to protect them from harm, but the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep (10:17).
- iii. The Gate: Jesus also calls Himself “the Gate” (10:7). Here, the symbol of the gate changes and instead of entering through the gate, Jesus becomes the Gate. He is the only way to God (John 14:6). Whoever enters through Him will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. He offers abundant life. On the other hand, thieves and robbers offer a way for the sheep, but their true objective is to “steal, kill, and destroy” them (10:10).
- iv. Other Sheep Not of this Sheep Pen: The Old Testament referred to the Jewish community as God’s flock. In this parable, Jesus reveals something that His disciples hadn’t grasped. The Shepherd also has “other sheep that are not of this sheep pen.” He would bring them in also and form one unified flock from the two (10:16). This is a reference to the inclusion of Gentiles into the Kingdom (Ephesians 2:11-22).

- v. **Authority:** In verses 17-18, the Good Shepherd had God's authority to lay down His life and to take it up again. He received this command from His Father. Messiah's death and resurrection were pictured in the Old Testament in the life of Jonah and in prophetic passages such as Psalm 16, which says, "You will not abandon me to the grave or let your Holy One see decay" (16:10). However these seeds of truth weren't fully developed until Christ's first advent.

C. Indictments Against Kingdom Enemies: Jesus indicted the religious leaders who had been entrusted with shepherding God's people as enemies of the Kingdom of Heaven. Instead of selflessly caring for the sheep and leading them into truth, they destroyed the sheep for their own selfish purposes. They had abandoned them when the Babylonian army marched into Jerusalem (586 B.C.) and did so again when Rome destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Rather than humbling themselves when the very Son of God judged them, they further hardened their hearts and in their stubborn pride, became infuriated (John 11:53).

Summary Statement: Jesus conveyed important truths in John 10 about His identity as King of the Kingdom and the exclusive means by which any person can enter that Kingdom.

Principle: *The Kingdom of Heaven and true life are only found in Jesus.*

Later, in a private conversation with His disciples, He spoke about this more directly saying, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). This claim is very exclusive and many post-modern thinkers find it offensive, but would He in fact be a *Good Shepherd* if it was true and He failed to tell us?

The Kingdom of Heaven is both now and future. In the future, believers will only know life. Presently, we still have troubles (John 16:33). Even so, the abundant life Jesus offers begins here and now as we submit our lives into His care. Submitting to Jesus' lordship not only involves a one-time decision but many daily decisions to go His way and not our own.

Application: What area of your life needs enriching and by what methods are you attempting to enrich it? By hijacking your life and taking charge? Or by laying it down in submission to the Good Shepherd? If you submit your cares and your circumstances to Him, He will lead you in and out and you will find green pasture, even in your trials.

Transition: We are seeing that Jesus' parables tell what God is like, how He acts, and what He expects of us. The Parable of the Good Samaritan powerfully illustrates what God expects of Kingdom members.

IV. The Good Samaritan – Luke 10:25-37: Once again, there are some who would say that, strictly speaking, the Good Samaritan is not a parable but more of a story. Regardless, Jesus used it to illustrate a Kingdom principle about what God expects.

A. Context

- i. Truth Hidden from the Learned: Luke has just finished telling his readers that Jesus praised the Lord for imparting understanding to His disciples, even while His truth remained hidden from the learned. Luke goes on to illustrate this by showing the confusion of a man who was thought to be very wise.
- ii. The Question of the Law Expert: This expert in the Law asked Jesus what was required to inherit eternal life. In turn, Jesus questioned him about the Law's requirements. The expert answered by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, which speaks of one's love for God, and Leviticus 19:18, which speaks of one's love for his neighbor. The Book of Deuteronomy did promise life to those who kept it, but the life to which it referred was life in the Promised Land of Canaan, the land the Lord had given them (Deuteronomy 6:2, 30:15, 19-20, 32:47). In saying the man answered correctly, Jesus was essentially affirming that the Deuteronomic principle applies to eternal life as well. However, He wasn't teaching legalism but rather, the impossibility of keeping the Law without a converted heart. Wanting to justify himself, the man asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus' parable answers that question.

B. Summary of Story: A traveling Jew was beaten by robbers and left lying alongside the road. A priest and a Levite both passed by the man without offering assistance. When a Samaritan came upon the injured man, he took pity, bandaged the man, took him to an inn, and paid for his care. Jesus asked the Law expert which of these three acted as a neighbor. The expert was forced to concede that the one who had shown mercy had acted as a neighbor. Notice that the lawyer did not concede, "The Samaritan was the neighbor." Rather, he answered, "The one who showed mercy." Jews despised Samaritans. Seven hundred years earlier, after the Assyrian captivity, the king of Assyria repopulated Israel with people from other subjugated nations. Some intermarried with the few Israelites remaining in the land and since northern Israel was often called by the name of her capital Samaria, this mixed populace became known as "Samaritans." They worshipped Yahweh but also their own foreign gods. Thus, the Jews considered them religious and biological "half-breeds" and would not associate with them.

C. Meaning and Application of the Parable: The Scripture to which the lawyer referred about loving one's neighbor is found in Leviticus 19:18. It specifically referred to loving fellow Israelites. However, later in that same chapter, Israelites were also commanded to love foreigners as themselves. For most Jews a "neighbor" was another Jew and certain strict religious groups did not even include all Jews in the list.ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus expanded their interpretation of the Law, as He had done on many other occasions (Matthew 5-7). One was not only to keep the details of the Law but also its principles.

Summary Statement: The plain message of the parable is that, because God loves without prejudice, He expects members of His Kingdom to do the same. What a very difficult obligation! How is it even possible? The answer is in Jesus' unspoken implication: Kingdom members must have converted hearts.

Principle: *Kingdom members have converted hearts.*

Purely motivated love, free of prejudice, is unnatural. If we are honest with ourselves, our love for one another is often selfishly motivated. We love because of what the other person does for us. The kind of love God requires is supernatural. God demonstrated His love in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Only His love is pure. Only He can truly love the unlovely without false motives. Kingdom members' hearts are converted when we say, "Yes!" to Jesus.

Application: Who is the Samaritan in your life? Have you given Jesus permission to love this person through you? Have you asked God to change your heart? Or if you are honest, would you have to admit that you have not even wanted to say "Yes" to Jesus' command to love this person because you feel they are undeserving?

Transition: Jesus' parables tell us what God is like, how He acts and what He expects of us. Jesus told many parables, but this lesson covers only three more. They are part of one collection and contain the same main truth.

V. **The Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Son** – Luke 15:1-32

A. Context: The context is given succinctly in 15:1-2: The Pharisees and teachers of the Law muttered complaints that Jesus welcomed and ate with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus began, “Suppose one of you,” and ended the third parable with an open-ended invitation. Although we are probably meant to understand that the tax collectors, sinners, and Jesus’ disciples overheard Him relate these three parables, Jesus was directly speaking to the religious leaders, addressing their pious complaints.

B. Summary and Main Emphasis: Jesus’ three successive parables all have the same essential storyline: something valuable was lost and then greatly rejoiced over when found.

- i. The Lost Sheep: In the first parable, the lost item is one sheep in a flock of 100. The owner (or perhaps the shepherd) searches until he finds the one, joyfully puts it on his shoulders, goes home and calls his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him that the lost sheep is found. Jesus concludes, “I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (15:7).
- ii. The Lost Coin: In the second parable, a woman loses one of her ten silver coins. She diligently searches until she finds it. Then, she calls her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her because her coin has been found. Again, Jesus makes His point: “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (15:10). God loves the lost.
- iii. The Lost (or Prodigal) Son: This third parable contains far more details, details that we should avoid allegorizing since they are simply part of a fictitious story, given by Jesus to make a singular point.
 1. *The Younger Son*: The parable has three main characters. The first is a younger son who demands his share of his inheritance. More commonly, sons received their inheritance upon the death of their father. Not only was this son impatient, he was foolish. He took the money and went off a great distance and squandered the entire amount on wild living. When a famine came, he became so desperate that he agreed to feed pigs, an animal that was unclean for Jews. Although the pigs ate, he himself was starving. This is a picture of a man in the most desperate and terrible of conditions. Then “he came to his senses” (15:17). This is the Hebrew/Aramaic phrase for “repented.”^{iv} Realizing the wealth of his father and that even his father’s servants have food to spare, he returned home, confessed to his father and asked for forgiveness.

2. *The Father:* When the father saw his lost son approaching from a distance, he ran (an action that was culturally inappropriate) to meet his lost son. Before his son could even complete his speech, the father restored the son's full rights to sonship: giving him the best robe, the father's ring of authority, and sandals for his feet (servants did not wear sandals). The father then called for a feast to be prepared to celebrate the return of his lost son. As it stands, the parable could have ended where we have left off and it would seem a perfect complement to the first two parables. The lost item (or person, in this case) is found and rejoiced over. However, in this third parable, the story continues.
3. *The Older Son:* The older son became angry when he learned that the fattened calf had been slaughtered to celebrate the return of his wayward brother. He is incensed that his sinful brother is the one being honored and complained to his father, emphasizing his own long years of toil in service to him.
4. *Conclusion:* One rule commonly applied to interpreting parables is called "the rule of end stress,"^v meaning that the main point is usually stressed at the end of a parable. This parable ends with the father inviting the older brother to join in the celebration. Thus, we discover Jesus' main point is in the father's words to the older son. Like the older brother, the Pharisees saw their obedience as a burden rather than a privilege. They resented the fact that Jesus offered salvation so freely, by grace. Jesus extended them the same invitation that the father in the parable extended to his son: Won't you rejoice when a lost sinner repents, rather than resenting his or her salvation? Jesus wanted the religious leaders to come out from their self-imposed burdens, be saved, and join the celebration. Notice that the parable does not tell us how the older brother chose to respond, indicating that Jesus' invitation to the Pharisees was also open-ended.

Summary Statement: The three parables in Luke 15 emphasize God's joy in saving lost sinners.

Principle: *God loves the lost and rejoices when they enter His Kingdom.*

Jesus gives us a thrilling image: the rejoicing of God and the angels in heaven over the repentance of one lost sinner. Jesus delights in saving sinners.

Application: Whom have you considered hopelessly lost? Will you pause and try to imagine the scene of heavenly rejoicing? God brings Himself great glory in saving the lost. Will you ask God to make this lost person a *trophy of His grace* and trust Him to do so?

Conclusion

God wants us to know Him more truly as He is. He has revealed Himself to us in the person, work, and words of Jesus (as seen in His parables). The Jewish religious community had the Old Testament Scriptures but these truths were not spelled out until Jesus came.

Is it possible that you have read the teachings of Jesus frequently enough that they have lost their significance for your everyday life? The aim of these parables is to help those with receptive hearts know more fully what God is like, how He acts, and what He expects, *and then to challenge us to respond.*

ⁱ Guthrie, Donald (1994). *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (4th ed., p. 1047). Leicester,

ⁱⁱ Borchert, G. L. (1996). *John 1–11* (Vol. 25A, p. 331). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stein, R. H. (1992). *Luke* (Vol. 24, p. 316). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

^{iv} Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus* (p. 130) and K. E. Bailey (1983), *Poet & Peasant/Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (pages 173-75). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

^v Stein, R. H. (1992). *Luke* (Vol. 24, p. 402). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.