

36 PARABLES

YELLOW BIBLE STUDY

Written by Craig McElvain

Film: *Buen Vecino*

Parable: *The Good Samaritan*

Scripture: *Luke 10:30-37*

Interpreting *Buen Vecino*

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is perhaps the most popular of Jesus' parables. It has big production value, the villains are religious figures, and the hero is unlikely to say the least. There's plenty of drama, too—robbery, violence, rescue, suspense, and grace. But in *Buen Vecino*, nobody's life is at stake...there wasn't even a robbery.

Randall Wallace, the screenwriter of *Braveheart*, said, "I never let facts get in the way of the truth." The parable communicates many things, but fundamentally the story rests on the truth that Christ calls us to help others. And in making *Buen Vecino* (which means "Good Neighbor" in Spanish) contemporary to our culture, the film explores our work life and occupational relationships.

The employees' striped shirts (which can be hard on the eyes) symbolize the dizzying experience we often feel at work. *Buen Vecino* explores a day when things fall apart around us, vacuums interrupt us, and wheelbarrows get dumped in our pools (or cubicles or whatever). Those (hopefully) rare, disastrous days can cause us to feel as though our very lives are at stake.

Cultural Background

In the Good Samaritan parable, Jesus uses familiar images to hook his listeners. The road from "Jerusalem to Jericho" was actually the superhighway of its day—a 40-mile stretch well-known for two things: 1) A generous population of priests on their way back and forth from Jerusalem to fulfill their priestly duties; and 2) Danger, particularly along one stretch known as *adodim* (which means "blood"—a reference to the often-violent muggings in that area). Probably why Jesus tells of a "priest and a Levite" who both "passed by" the victim.

Discussion Questions

1. Can you compare some similarities between work life and a long, dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho?
2. Are there "priests" and "Levites" at your place of work? Are there "robbers"? Are you a "priest" at your work?
3. Have you ever "passed by" people in need at work?

Cultural Background (continued)

Jesus intentionally used the image of a Samaritan for impact. Samaritans were hated by the Jews and seen as both heretics and half-breeds. However, this Samaritan goes out of his way to care for the victim. The "two denarii" the Samaritan gives the innkeeper would probably have covered expenses for two to three weeks.

Commentators through the ages have disagreed on the meaning of this parable. Some have even contended that it's not a parable at all, but rather an extended allegory. They saw the road from Jerusalem to Jericho as the road from Eden to Babel, and that sin has allowed the devil to rob and beat us, leaving us "half dead" by the roadside. Jesus, to many, represents the Good Samaritan (he was even accused of being a Samaritan by the Pharisees—see John 8:48).

Jesus has come to rescue the lost and broken—especially the outcasts. He cares for our wounds and even pays the price for our healing. Critics of this interpretation say it overspiritualizes the parable and misses the fundamental point of being a true "neighbor" to all.

Discussion Questions

1. What did it cost (more than money) for the Samaritan to help the beaten man? What did it cost Magdalena to help her co-worker in *Buen Vecino*?
2. The Samaritan in *Buen Vecino* is a loud, non-English-speaking hotel maid. If Jesus told his parable today and wanted to make the Samaritan character someone a typical church audience might look down upon, whom do you think Jesus would choose? (e.g., an Islamic man, a lesbian, a political liberal or conservative...)
3. Who would be the most offensive to you? Do you consider such a person your neighbor?

As you reflect on the parable and the film, consider that Jesus told these stories so that we could relate them to our everyday lives. Jesus reveals himself through such common experiences, and we can count on finding him in the most unlikely of places. Christ can "show up" while we're sitting in front of our computers at work, cooking dinner, or driving in traffic. We often point to big moments in our lives as when we've received significant revelation, but through his parables, Jesus clearly states that learning about his love, grace, and mercy can be experienced in the most ordinary circumstances of life.

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Film: *Buried Talent*

Parable: *The Talents*

Scripture: *Matthew 25:14-30*

Interpreting *Buried Talent*

The Parable of the Talents involves money, as a “talent” is another name for currency. However, *Buried Talent* involves painting. So... why isn't this film about modern-day investments? As you watch the film and explore the texts, consider that the deeper meaning of the parable examines stewardship beyond finance. God leaves many things in our care: Money, friendships, charity, talents, etc. The title (*Buried Talent*) is an obvious play on words.

The parable also involves fear and how fear can inhibit and freeze us. As you watch the film, consider the challenge the artists are given. It's an extraordinary opportunity with tremendous resources... but also limited time and instruction.

Cultural Background

Wealthy landowners usually delegated control and multiplication of their wealth to trained accountants, or as this parable, servants. These landowners also often embarked on long journeys. Given the time period, the value of a talent was about 10,000 denarii. One denarius was a day's wage. If you do the math, one talent was therefore worth a life's wages for an average worker! Five talents were worth what each of these servants would make in five lifetimes.

Discussion Questions

1. How can we compare the two propositions? (Investing coins in the original parable and creating art in *Buried Talent*.)
2. What are some things in your life that have been entrusted to your care?
3. Do you sometimes feel that God asks much of you, but you sense a heavy burden to work it out on your own?

Cultural Background (continued)

One of the safest and least-profitable ways of protecting one's money was to bury it in the ground; such buried reserves are still occasionally found to this day.

Doubling one's investment was normal, and the servants should've been able to accomplish this. The principle that integrity in smaller matters qualified one to prove one's integrity in larger matters was often invoked in antiquity.

The third servant was afraid to do anything with his master's assets other than keep them “safely” below ground. He should've known better; the smallest possible investment—providing interest on a savings deposit—wouldn't have endangered the money, either.

Discussion Questions

1. Tom's character is the most professional of the group. He has a portfolio of work and is quite organized. Given this opportunity to be free to paint whatever he likes, he freezes and fails. Can you think of a time when you froze in the face of a similar opportunity and ended up “burying” your talent? What did you learn from that situation?
2. Jamie's character is right out of college, and this is her first interview for a painting job. She's the most nervous of the group, and yet she produces a marvelous painting. Can you think of a time when you let your talent rise to the surface and experienced success? What did you learn from that situation?

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Film: *Found*

Parable: *The Lost Coin*

Scripture: *Luke 15:8-10*

Cultural Background of the Parable

Middle-eastern history tells us that the lost coin may have been from this woman's wedding headdress (the equivalent of a modern-day wedding ring). In the first century, this coin may well have been part of a woman's dowry (the asset she brought into the marriage)—an asset of great sentimental and intrinsic value. The silver coins in her possession would likely be the only money she brings into the marriage—it's money that remains hers even if the marriage is dissolved. The fact that she has only 10 coins (worth about 10 days of a worker's wages) suggests that her father's family is not well off financially—which presumes that, if a wedding is coming, she'd be marrying into a household of equally limited means.

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Value

Some things have very low extrinsic value—such as the necklace in the video parable. It might have a street value of, say, \$100 at the most. But when you factor in the intrinsic value of the item—what it represents to its owner—its value is far greater.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the necklace in *Found* compare to the man's other possessions?
2. If your home became engulfed in flames, and you could rescue ONE item only—the single possession that means the most to you—what item would you save?
3. If this one item were valued on e-Bay, what price do you suppose would secure the winning bid?
4. What price would you accept for it?
5. How does God value “lost people”? Why do they matter to God? What is their “intrinsic” value?

Cultural Background (continued)

Floors in the ancient Middle East were often woven and therefore had a lot of cracks—many, many places where a dropped item could hide itself indefinitely. That, plus the lack of windows and bad lighting, made it nearly impossible to find something that slipped through the cracks. To locate a lost item, one had to practically turn the house upside-down.

Discussion Questions

1. What kinds of losses have you experienced?
2. Where were you when Jesus found you? What crack had you fallen into?
3. We often identify people who don't have a relationship with Jesus but begin going to church as “seekers”—but in this parable, God does the seeking. If we understood God's heart for people who are lost, what people can you think of who you'd pursue that you aren't currently pursuing?

As you reflect on the parable and the film, consider that Jesus told these stories so that we could relate them to our everyday lives. Jesus reveals himself through such common experiences, and we can count on finding him in the most unlikely of places. Christ can “show up” while we're sitting in front of our computers at work, cooking dinner, or driving in traffic. We often point to big moments in our lives as when we've received significant revelation, but through his parables, Jesus clearly states that learning about his love, grace, and mercy can be experienced in the most ordinary circumstances of life.

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BLUE BIBLE STUDY

Written by Craig McElvain

Film: *The Music Box*

Parable: *The Hidden Treasure*

Scripture: *Matthew 13:44*

Interpreting *The Music Box*

A man is out buying antique music boxes and “stumbles upon” a box of superior value. The box played a crucial role in his childhood and has great sentimental value to him. The result is that the man will pay whatever it takes to get that box—however many zeros he must add to his check. The owners wonder if they’ve missed something, but they finally agree to sell. The man is ecstatic since the box is far more important to him than the money.

To “stumble upon something” is to find it through no effort of our own. It’s an accident...in reality, that “something” finds us. Jesus says this is very similar to the Kingdom of God. It finds us. We don’t find it. This is the image Jesus paints in the parable of the Hidden Treasure. A first-century farmer might’ve had his own anecdotal version of this story—a moment in the past when a friend literally “stumbled upon” a hidden treasure. This was somewhat common, since banks were unusual in Palestine. Farmers would often hide their treasures in their fields at secret locations. This worked well—except in cases of accidental or sudden deaths. If the farmer died unexpectedly, the secret hiding place went to the grave with him. Then maybe 50 years later some sharecropper would run his plow into an obstacle, only to find it’s buried treasure he stumbled upon. If the sharecropper didn’t own the field, he’d sell everything he had to purchase it, knowing full well that the value at the end of the day would far exceed the purchase price.

Read the Following Passages Together

Matthew 10:37-39

Matthew 6:19-21

Mark 8:34-36

Luke 12:13-21

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever “stumbled upon” a great “treasure”?
2. Why do we tend to hang onto our stuff instead of exchanging it for the Kingdom of God?
3. If you’ve already sold out to the Kingdom, what benefits would you say have outweighed the costs?
4. What do you find yourself hanging on to (still) in the midst of this spiritual transaction?
5. Do you see yourself as having “stumbled upon” the kingdom, or are you more prone to see it as something you’ve searched for, found, and earned?

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BLUE BIBLE STUDY

Written by Craig McElvain

Film: *Gnobody's Gnome*

Parable: *The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant*

Scripture: *Matthew 18:15-35*

Interpreting *Gnobody's Gnome*

We all want to be treated mercifully...but we tend to dole out raw justice to others in need of mercy. That's the simple plot of this film. The middle-aged yuppie Harold is in deep water financially. He's hoping the judge will see his situation in a merciful light, particularly if he liquidates his prized gnome collection. One problem: He's loaned "Sneezy" to his neighbor. Strangely enough he can't see his neighbor's need in the same light of mercy that he sees his own plight, so he demands justice. He wrenches the gnome from his befuddled neighbor's hands. In the film's conclusion, the judge decides to give Harold exactly what he's given his neighbor—raw justice.

Cultural Background

Jesus launched into this parable in response to Peter's question about forgiveness. Rabbis were known to say that forgiveness is to be extended three times before finally refusing to indulge a habitual sinner. Peter believed he was being wildly magnanimous when he suggested to Jesus that people ought to be forgiven up to seven times. But Jesus instead says "seventy times seven." This Hebrew idiom was used as an equivalent to our concept of infinity—i.e., more times than you can count.

Jesus then followed up his shocking proclamation with a parable that might have been common in the first century. A king calls in his servants and asks them to settle accounts. One particular steward owes the king the equivalent of several million dollars (10,000 talents was equal to 375 tons of silver—more than Herod the Great's annual revenue). The obvious question is how this steward could've ever acquired so large a debt. On his civil servant's salary, his request of the king to "be patient, and I will pay it all" was beyond ludicrous. The king decides, in light of this impossible situation, to shock the man and tear up the entire stack of IOUs. One might think this would set off the celebration of the century for this lucky steward, but instead he plows headlong into an unthinkable hypocrisy. He meets a man who owes him "100 denarii" (the equivalent of the cost of an iPod; much easier to pay off than the debt the servant owed the king). But instead of frolicking in the mercy he'd just received, he decides to dole out raw justice and throws this man into prison.

The king's other servants saw this hypocrisy play out, so they return to their master and relate the whole affair to him. Enraged, he sends them back to capture the unmerciful servant and have him turned over to the jailers for "torture" until he paid back all he owes. With some of his harshest words, Jesus says to the crowd listening: *This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.*

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it so easy for us to dole out raw justice to people in need?
2. What about our lack of forgiveness boggles God's mind?
3. How big is your pile of IOUs before God in comparison to the pile you hold from other people?
4. Won't being merciful to others who repeat the same sins over and over simply indulge them, giving them no reason to repent?

Application

Forgiveness can only occur when I realize the phenomenal debt that God has forgiven me. The root of mercilessness is found in a lack of honest self-awareness. I once had a roommate who borrowed my car for just about everything. During his junior year of college he finally got his own car. One time when my car had broken down I asked to borrow his car so I could take a test on campus. He looked me straight in the eye and said, "It's my policy not to loan my car to anyone." I was blown away. The hypocrisy of the whole thing enraged me. I now see that this is how God must feel when I refuse to tear up other people's IOUs. In light of the enormous pile God has torn up for me, no debt is too great for me to forgive.

Discussion Questions

1. What debts are most difficult for you to forgive?
 - a. The little irritations?
 - b. The slaps to your ego?
 - c. The ones that happen over and over?
 - d. The big deals?
2. If you could see your sin from God's perspective, where would you see a pattern of repetition (doing the same wrong over and over)?
3. What could help you get in touch with the depth of your IOUs to God?
4. If you realize you've held on to someone's IOU, what should you do to make it right?

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Written by Craig McElvain

Film: *Like Father Like Son*

Parable: *The Two Debtors*

Scripture: *Luke 7:36-48*

Interpreting *Like Father Like Son*

We all have the tendency to view our sins as indicative of run-of-the-mill brokenness—and the sins of others as somehow dastardly and insidious. That's our fallen human nature. In this video the pastor (the father) cannot see the similarities between his issues and his son's issues. He's blind to his own condition. Then enter the grandfather. Although he lacks physical sight, he can see clearly the parallels between his son and grandson. He sees that both are in need of forgiveness.

Cultural Background

Jesus tells a short parable about our inability to see clearly in Luke 7. It's in response to the arrogance of a religious leader named Simon who has invited Jesus to a meal at his home (probably a post-synagogue pot-luck). The culinary customs of the day required that they recline at a table, propped up by one arm, with their legs pointing away from the table, using the other arm to eat. This would've left Jesus' feet exposed to those serving.

Into this scene slipped an uninvited woman whose immorality was notorious. She may have been a prostitute, or maybe just a well-known party girl. We don't really know what her particular sin was—except for the clear implication that her reputation preceded her. Overcome with sobbing, she kneels at Jesus' feet and showers them with fluids—i.e., her own tears and even some very expensive perfume. Some have speculated that this perfume was a tool of the trade for prostitutes, while others suggest she bought this expensive ointment with the proceeds from her questionable activities. Either way—hers was a clearly shocking act. And then, to make matters worse, she kissed Jesus' feet while trying to wipe away her tears with her unfurled hair. This was a no-no in first-century Israel. A reputable woman never unfurled her hair in public—which shows how blind this woman had become to others' opinions. The only opinion she cared about was Jesus'.

Simon, on the other hand, had neglected all the normal middle-eastern etiquette. He failed to provide water to wash the guest's feet, to anoint the guest's head with oil, and he even failed to greet his guest with a kiss—such neglect was the equivalent of refusing to even shake hands. It's this contrast between Simon and the sinful woman that sends Jesus into storytelling mode.

Discussion Questions

1. When have you perceived other people wrongly, or have been wrongly perceived by others?
2. In our culture, what sins are socially "acceptable"? What sins are culturally "notorious"?
3. What actions would classify someone as a "sinful" person today?
4. How accurately do you think you see your own sinfulness?

Application

Jesus told a parable about two debtors—one who owes 500 denarii, and one who owes 50 denarii. (One denarius was a day's wage.) In both cases the debtors are incapable of paying. That's when the twist turns the story. The moneylender forgives both debts! Then Jesus grilled Simon with a few well-placed questions:

Which of the debtors will love the moneylender the most? Simon rightly replied that the one with the bigger debt will love more. Which brought Jesus to question number two:

"Do you see this woman?"

This is the crux of Jesus' story. Sometimes we only see what we want to see. We're blind to the obvious. Simon looked at this woman and could only see her sinful reputation; Jesus wanted Simon to see his own sinfulness (which God can forgive) and the woman's forgiven status. Jesus wanted Simon to see the distance between his own sin and the woman's sin as truly non-existent.

Jesus wanted Simon to know that his "smaller" debt was nothing to boast about—he and the woman were both sinners in God's eyes.

How often do we share Simon's arrogance that blinds us to the truth about ourselves and others? It's very likely the reason why so many of us are lukewarm in our affection and devotion to Jesus; we simply don't see clearly the size of the debt he's forgiven us—and our inability to pay it.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you see your debt as
 - Bigger than other people's?
 - Smaller than other's?
 - About the same as other's?
2. What makes you blind to your own brokenness?
3. How passionate are you in your devotion to Jesus? What could you do to increase that passion?
4. Do you think the habit of confessing specific sins would create in you more gratitude, or more guilt?
5. What sins are acceptable in the church today?
6. How can the church keep from ignoring some sins while inflating others

As you reflect on the parable and the film, consider that Jesus told these stories so that we could relate them to our everyday lives. Jesus reveals himself through such common experiences, and we can count on finding him in the most unlikely of places. Christ can "show up" while we're sitting in front of our computers at work, cooking dinner, or driving in traffic. We often point to big moments in our lives as when we've received significant revelation, but through his parables, Jesus clearly states that learning about his love, grace, and mercy can be experienced in the most ordinary circumstances of life.

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CYAN BIBLE STUDY

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Film: *Spilt Milk*

Parable: *New Wine in Old Wine Skins*

Scripture: *Luke 5:36-39*

Interpreting *Spilt Milk*

The child in this film understands that milk is poured into a bowl filled with cereal. But he looks inside the fridge and sees the gallon he usually pours into the cereal and decides to use it—except that the gallon of milk is rotten. It's past its prime...and he pays a price for drinking it. Overlooking the new nonfat milk, he figures, "I can still use the gallon container because that's what I'm used to."

Cultural Background

Wine and wineskins were to people of the first century just as convenience store paper cups and diet soda are to us. We all know you can refill an old paper cup with new soda for less money than buying a new one filled with new soda. The problem is, after a while a reused paper cup gets nasty...it leaks! So we throw it out and start all over again. The same was true for wine and wineskins. When you got a new batch of wine, it was no big deal to fill up your old wineskin with it—that is, until it sprung a leak (as old wineskins were prone to do). You don't hang on to the old nasty thing and declare, "I don't care if the wine spills or not—I'm keeping my vintage wineskin!" That would be foolishness. Yet that's exactly what religious people have done, over and over again, throughout church history. Jesus saw it happening in his own day as the Pharisees tried to hold to the "synagogue" wineskins of their day. Jesus wasn't telling them that their traditions and structures were bad, but rather, like old paper cups or worn-out wineskins, they no longer served their purpose: To carry the wine! The skin isn't the issue—the wine is.

Discussion Questions

1. What wineskins do we hang onto in church today? Ways of doing things that no longer hold together effectively?

2. Can you think of a time that the church has responded to a new idea with, "We've never done it that way before"—and then ended up doing things the same old way?
3. What way of knowing God do you hang onto because you like (or are most comfortable with) your old cup?
4. What pioneers were once "new wineskins" but are now old hat?

Application

Jesus did religion differently than the Jewish leaders were used to. He "ate with sinners." He taught on hillsides and from the bows of boats. He didn't follow the "old wineskin" habits of hand washing and Sabbath-keeping. As a result, the religious authorities despised Jesus. They said, in essence, "We've never done it that way before, so you're sinning." In this simple parable Jesus at once unnerved and reassured them. He wanted them to know that the old "traditions" were being tossed out like nasty old cups or leaky wineskins because they no longer did the job of holding the new wine of the gospel. Any wine connoisseur knows that wine is alive—it breathes, it expands. Jesus taught that God's word is also alive and cannot be contained by any "once and for all" wineskin. It crosses cultures and ethnicities, and in each situation the wineskin looks different, but it's still the same old (new) wine! The skin (its container) will change, but the wine remains the same. We struggle with this today. When we find a way of doing church that works, we hang on for dear life...sometimes years after it starts leaking. We must remember that any single wineskin cannot contain the gospel; it will always burst.

Discussion Questions

1. What things need to remain the same if the wine's going to remain intact?
2. How do we distinguish the wine from its wineskin?
3. Where do you see leaks in our current way of operating?

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CYAN BIBLE STUDY

Written by Craig McElvain

Film: *a few weeks later*

Parable: *The Rich Fool*

Scripture: *Luke 12:16-21*

Interpreting *a few weeks later*

a few weeks later takes place after the death of the Rich Fool, so it's told somewhat in retrospect in relation to the parable. In this case, the wife is the "fool" since she acquired an immense amount of clothing that she never wore—then she died, and her widower is left to pick up the pieces. This isn't a stereotypical attack on women who own too many clothes; this is a story of a person who owns countless things she has merely stored up. The tags are still on the clothing. And her grieving husband must "empty her barns," so to speak, and process the parable vicariously.

Cultural Background

The context of Jesus' parable is a dispute between two brothers. Jewish law said that the eldest brother received a double share of the father's inheritance, while the rest of the money was split between the remaining brothers. We don't really know for sure, but it might be a case where a younger brother feels ripped off because of the inheritance division, so he's hoping Jesus will publicly side with him. From Jesus' perspective, this guy is trying to make this a "fairness" issue when in reality it's about greed—the desire for more stuff. So in essence he says, "Quit acting like you don't care about stuff when you do everything you can to acquire it"—i.e., "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (v. 15). This is where we get confused; we don't know the meaning of the word enough. Most of us have more than enough, but often we believe it unfair that we don't have more. Such pretense is a bunker for our covetousness.

Discussion Questions

1. Where in life do you feel ripped off?
2. What would change in your life if you stopped acquiring things once you really had "enough" things?
3. How do we know when we have enough?

Application

The Epicureans had a well-known philosophy in Jesus' day—"eat, drink, and be merry." For them the 20th-century bumper sticker gets it right: "He who dies with the most toys—wins." Jesus' parable about the Rich Fool is a cautionary tale for all of us who believe that consumption defines life. We western-

ers typically deny they believe this, but our lifestyles contradict that. Americans are buried under a mountain of consumer debt (more than \$2 trillion in 2001). More than that, the average household carries a consumer debt of \$12,000, and a credit card debt of \$8,000. Plus 60 percent of us spend more each year than we have coming in! No wonder Jesus found that covetousness (the desire for more stuff) is something we must be on "guard against." We give lip service to the "you can't take it with you" saying, but in reality we stuff our barns as full as we can get them.

Discussion Questions

1. What priorities are your neighbors focused on—"stuff" or wisdom?
2. Why do we try to deny our "covetousness"?
3. What percentage of your stuff could you throw away before you'd start missing it?

Application (cont'd)

In this parable, a rich man, decides he's worked hard for his "stuff," and now he deserves a little rest and relaxation. Finally, after all his hard work, it's time to live a little. So he enlarges his storage capacity under the misguided assumption that it's enough for the long haul. What he doesn't know is that his time is up. Hit by a truck...drowned in a lake...shot in a drive-by...suffocated by lung cancer—Jesus doesn't say how he died that night, only that it was the end of his road, and all he'd stored up was for naught because he was forever separated from it. This is the problem with Epicureanism—you can play and live for the next thrill as much as you want, but you never know when the sand will run out of the hourglass...and then you'll need something more enduring than possessing the most toys (which you can no longer possess, anyway). The question of this parable is, "How then shall we live?" Jesus' answer: "Be rich toward God." Spend more time and energy acquiring wisdom from God than accumulating "stuff." Live your life as though tomorrow may, indeed, be your final day.

Discussion Questions

1. What would change for you if you knew your hourglass will run out tomorrow?
2. Do you know anyone who's lived out the "eat, drink, and be merry" philosophy successfully?
3. What would it look like to be "rich toward God"?

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CYAN
BIBLE STUDY

Written by Craig McElvain

Film: *Beyond Beautiful*

Parable: *The Two Sons*

Scripture: *Matthew 21:28-32*

Interpreting *Beyond Beautiful*

Our relationship with God is a love story. In the parable, the son who pleased the father went to work in the vineyard. Yes, God wants us to work in the “vineyard,” and that could mean many things. This short film illustrates that the work (Charlie’s decision to go on the blind date) is only part of the story. The rest of the story is Charlie’s reward for doing the difficult thing. The reward for such work is a relationship with God...the best kind of romance.

Cultural Background

Jesus told a story about two sons—one who was a joy in the morning but a disaster at midnight, and another who was a pain at sunup but a surprising source of pride at sundown. He wanted to highlight the difference between those who talk a big faith game and don’t really mean it, and those whose actions speak louder than their words or appearances. Jesus’ critics pilloried him for neglecting the big shots in the synagogue and befriending tax collectors and prostitutes. But Jesus wanted them to know that God isn’t impressed by big talk; God is impressed by diligence—by showing up—and obedience. God can wait until day’s end to determine if a person is sincere. When Jesus proclaimed the arrival of the Kingdom of God, the scribes and Pharisees (who were zealous for it’s arrival) were NO SHOWS! Hookers, beer guzzlers, and swindlers, on the other hand, made a beeline for the offer of Jesus’ grace. The Son of God challenged the religious establishment—as he challenges you and me today—which child was a source of pride to his dad at the end of the day?

Discussion Questions

1. How common is it that people claim faith but fail to live it out?
2. How do I justify my inactivity in light of my faith profession?
3. Will the kingdom of God be populated with “church folk” or with “ruffians”? With what standard will God judge us at the end of the day?
4. For what task does the Father want us to show up?

Faith without Works...

James wrote:

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18 But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. (2:14-18)

Discussion Questions

1. How do we balance faith and works? Can we be a combination of these two brothers?
2. How is the need to balance faith and works different than the concept of salvation by works?

36 PARABLES

AMBER BIBLE STUDY

Written by Craig McElvain

Film: *The Good Shepherd*

Parable: *The Good Shepherd*

Scripture: *John 10:11-18*

Interpreting *The Good Shepherd*

Love always shows itself through a willingness to sacrifice for the beloved. That's true in this film about a little girl who desperately wants to care for hamsters from her older sister's class (on loan from school). Her snooty older sister isn't really concerned with the welfare of the animals—she sees them more as a badge of prestige than creatures worthy of her nurture. This creates a crisis in the younger sister, a committed animal-lover. If she tries to help the hamsters, she knows her sister will rat her out (no pun intended) for an accident that she caused earlier in the day. Love, however, wins out, as the younger sister sacrifices herself in order to make sure that the pets have been properly fed and watered.

Jesus makes a clear distinction between the good shepherd and the “hired hand.” Most of the time they look about the same...until the wolf comes. Then the difference is apparent. The hired hand runs—no sense in sacrificing for some dumb sheep. The good shepherd stands his ground. He's willing to take a hit for the sheep because it's not just a job for the good shepherd—he actually loves the sheep. Jesus goes on to say that he is that good shepherd for us. Jesus cares about his sheep (us) so much that he was willing to lay down his life (on the cross) to stop the wolf from devouring us.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some examples of “hired hand” leaders today?
2. How does this parable illuminate Jesus' sacrifice on the cross?
3. What things in your life are you willing to sacrifice for?

Background

Some cultures herd sheep with dogs and whistles. They drive the sheep where they want them to go. This was not true for Jewish shepherds. They led and protected the sheep. The sheep became trusting of their shepherd (if he was good). They followed the sound of his voice. This is love-based shepherding, not fear-based. Notice how Peter caught on to this model in 1 Peter 5:2-4:

“Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”

Discussion Questions

1. How can we tell the difference between the shepherd's voice and other voices?
2. Did you view religion as fear-based or love-based when you were growing up?
3. What distinguishes good shepherds from hired hands today?

As you reflect on the parable and the video, consider that Jesus told these parables so that we could learn truth in the midst of our everyday lives. Because reveals himself through common experiences, and we should be able to find Jesus in the most unlikely places. Christ can “show up” while we're sitting in front of our computers at work, cooking dinner, or driving in traffic. It's great to learn during the big moments of our lives, but Christ clearly notes that learning about his love, his grace, and his mercy can be experienced in the most ordinary circumstances of our lives as well.

36 PARABLES

AMBER BIBLE STUDY

Written by Craig McElvain

Film: *Tractor Safety Tips*

Parable: *The Fig Tree*

Scripture: *Matthew 24:30-33*

Interpreting *Tractor Safety Tips*

Most of us fail to read the manual when we acquire a new toy. We want to start playing immediately. In this film, the owner of the new tractor is no exception. Because of his drowsiness, he decides to skip the instructions and misses the tractor safety warnings. The result of his irresponsible impatience is disastrous. Double vision causes him to smack his head on a tree branch. He passes out only to awaken to his new toy bursting into flames as it collides (unmanned) with a propane tank. If only he had heeded the manual's warnings.

So it is with us. In an effort to race forward to the "end" (where Jesus sets up his glorious Kingdom), we overlook his manual warnings that calamities must come first. This news, on the surface, is discouraging...but when you look deeper, it needn't be. These things tell us that summer is at hand. Luke's Gospel puts it this way: "So when all these things begin to happen, stand straight and look up, for your salvation is near!" (21:28)

Discussion Questions

1. Why are we so prone to skip the instructions?
2. Have you ever experienced disaster because you failed to read or follow the instructions?
3. In what ways do we get caught off guard by current events?

Background

In Matthew 24 Jesus gives a laundry list of warning signs (things that must happen before the end). Failure to obey these warnings, according to Jesus, is akin to missing out on the obvious signs of summer. In Israel, the fig tree was well known as the most accurate barometer of summer's arrival—it withholds its blossom until the final freeze of spring has passed. Any farmer worth his salt knew that you couldn't reliably proceed with the business of summer until the fig tree signaled the season's arrival.

In the same way Jesus warned his followers that calamities such as false messiahs (vv. 4-5), wars and rumors of wars (v. 6), famines and earthquakes (v. 7), and persecution (vv. 9-10) might cause anxiety in unobservant disciples. Jesus wanted those who fear the destruction of winter to see such calamities as fig tree-like signs that summer (i.e., the end of time and the establishment of God's Kingdom) is imminent.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Jesus use the fig tree as his object lesson in this parable?
2. Why do people become discouraged by life's calamities?
3. What happens to believers who fail to discern the "signs"?

As you reflect on the parable and the video, consider that Jesus told these parables so that we could learn truth in the midst of our everyday lives. Because he reveals himself through common experiences, and we should be able to find Jesus in the most unlikely places. Christ can "show up" while we're sitting in front of our computers at work, cooking dinner, or driving in traffic. It's great to learn during the big moments of our lives, but Christ clearly notes that learning about his love, his grace, and his mercy can be experienced in the most ordinary circumstances of our lives as well.

36 PARABLES

AMBER BIBLE STUDY

Written by Craig McElvain

Film: *Afterlife*

Parable: *The Rich Man and Lazarus*

Scripture: *Luke 16:19-31*

Interpreting *Afterlife*

In the film *Afterlife*, Mary has had an automobile accident that leads to a near-death experience. In her experience, hell is perceived as a vivid reality. As she awakens in the hospital, the professional “helper” tries to convince her that hell isn’t real and that her experience is easily explained away. This “explaining away” has always been a temptation, since many feel that a “loving God” could never punish people.

In this parable Jesus tells the story of an affluent man who cannot imagine a reversal of fortune in the afterlife. He lived in luxury on earth but finds himself on the other side in hell. Even after death, the Rich Man tries to pull aristocratic strings—barking out requests to Abraham that poor Lazarus function as his servant.

Discussion Questions

1. Who do you suppose Jesus was addressing with this parable?
2. Why do we find hell to be an objectionable concept? How do we try to explain it away?
3. In what ways do we rely on our heritage or our earthly accomplishments to keep us from eternal trouble?

Background

Here in Luke 16 Jesus tells several parables about rich people. In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Rich Man remains nameless. All we know is that he has five brothers and wears the purple clothing of an aristocrat. In the parable he appeals to Abraham as a fellow Israelite, assuming it will somehow buy him special privilege. Abraham tells the Rich Man of the harsh realities of eternity: Judgment is irrevocable. In fact, there is a “chasm” between heaven and hell, and after death it cannot be crossed. We naturally may minimize the irrevocable nature of hell, but in this parable Jesus underlines its permanence. There is no chance of appeal.

The Rich Man was hoping to get a free pass based on his resume—as far as he was concerned, hell wasn’t on the radar screen. The point of contrast in the parable is between this man’s riches and the abject poverty of Lazarus. The Scripture tells us that Lazarus was hoping for some bread scraps from this bourgeois’ table, which refers to the use of bread as napkins in wealthy middle-eastern households. The rich would wipe their hands on the bread and toss it to the floor as unfit for their consumption—and Lazarus wasn’t too proud to fight the dogs for the scraps.

Note: The Rich Man didn’t end up in hell because of sins of commission (wicked acts) but because of sins of omission (failure to see the neediness of Lazarus and respond). Not that sins of commission don’t matter; rather Jesus points out how sinful it is to ignore suffering and pain around us.

1 John 3:17 puts it this way: “If any one of you has material possessions and sees his brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you?”

Discussion Questions

1. What resume items do I believe will get me a free pass to heaven?
2. What sins of omission will God bring to our attention in eternity?
3. If we truly perceived hell as an actuality, how would it change our daily behavior? Our dealings with others? Our spiritual lives?

As you reflect on the parable and the video, consider that Jesus told these parables so that we could learn truth in the midst of our everyday lives. Because reveals himself through common experiences, and we should be able to find Jesus in the most unlikely places. Christ can “show up” while we’re sitting in front of our computers at work, cooking dinner, or driving in traffic. It’s great to learn during the big moments of our lives, but Christ clearly notes that learning about his love, his grace, and his mercy can be experienced in the most ordinary circumstances of our lives as well.

36 PARABLES

PURPLE BIBLE STUDY

Written by Craig McElvain

Film: *Out of Reach*

Parable: *The Friend at Midnight*

Scripture: *Luke 11:5-8*

Interpreting *Out of Reach*

The Parable of the Friend at Midnight explores prayer.

There's no better example of persistence and faith than that of a child. Jesus even tells us to have faith like a child. The children in *Out of Reach* are irresistible. In fact, one can't help but wonder how the father could resist the requests of his daughter... leaning over his shoulder and begging him through her missing front teeth. That's probably how God sees us...not as annoying people pounding on the door at midnight, but as adorable children.

Cultural Background

Jesus isn't suggesting here that God is like a reluctant, sleepy neighbor; rather he's saying that God responds to persistence. This persistence in prayer is a boldness that stays at it until God answers. Such persistence indicates faith, and God responds to faith (Hebrews 11:6).

The elements of the parable would've been familiar to first-century Jews. This request of the neighbor was nothing unusual, since all communities saw hospitality as a civic obligation. The visitor (who often traveled late at night to avoid the stifling heat) was to be treated hospitably, not just by his actual hosts, but also by the entire community. The social requirement to provide food and shelter were givens, and it was probably normal to offer guests unbroken loaves of bread rather than leftover scraps. Bread was used as a utensil in Jesus' day, similar to knives and forks. Since baking was often a communal activity, the host knew at once who might have fresh, unbroken loaves available.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you feel timid about approaching God with your needs?
2. This parable tells a story of someone pounding on the door on behalf of someone else—a friend from out of town. How boldly do you pray for the needs of others?

Application

The assumed question of the parable is, *Can you imagine asking your neighbor for a hand in hospitality and hearing a refusal?* The implied answer is a decisive, *No way!* People in Eastern cultures would have seen “door locked” and “kids in bed” as bogus excuses, a shirking of communal responsibility.

Just as they couldn't imagine a neighbor being so inhospitable, Jesus is saying we shouldn't view God as reluctant to answer our prayers.

Persistence comes when I know I'm doing the right thing, and that's why God responds to persistence in prayer. We don't need to bug God; God isn't reluctant to give us what we need. We must, however, persist in prayer so that God sees faith and rewards it.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you ever feel as though you're bugging God with your prayers? Does it sometimes feel as though God's standing on the other side of the door telling you to go away?
2. Do you have any examples of when you've prayed persistently, and God has answered those prayers?
3. Have you given up praying about something that maybe requires a little more persistence?

As you reflect on the parable and the video, consider that Jesus told these parables so that we could learn truth in the midst of our everyday lives. Because reveals himself through common experiences, and we should be able to find Jesus in the most unlikely places. Christ can “show up” while we're sitting in front of our computers at work, cooking dinner, or driving in traffic. It's great to learn during the big moments of our lives, but Christ clearly notes that learning about his love, his grace, and his mercy can be experienced in the most ordinary circumstances of our lives as well.

36 PARABLES

PURPLE BIBLE STUDY

Written by Craig McElvain

Film: *The Car Lot*

Parable: *The Shrewd Manager*

Scripture: *Luke 16:1-13*

Interpreting The Car Lot

The Parable of the Shrewd Manager examines some shady business dealings—and what better place to explore shady business than at a used car lot? *The Car Lot* examines to what lengths people will go to get ahead...especially when their backs are against the wall.

After Trenton is fired, he thinks on his feet to secure future employment. Adapting this parable to a short film is a difficult task because you don't really know whom to root for. Once again, Jesus creatively invents a new form of storytelling—a story without a protagonist.

Cultural Background

This parable, on face value, is quite disturbing. It's almost as if Jesus is condoning underhandedness! The Parable of the Shrewd Manager, in fact, has been a problem for interpreters ever since Jesus told it. The primary debate seems to center on the character of the employer.

One school sees him as a noble and generous man, only concerned with what's merciful. In other words, the boss has just cause to fire his dishonest employee. He even allows him to turn over his responsibilities without losing face. The dishonest employee then rewards his boss' mercy by using the extra time to endear himself to clients, all the while shamelessly counting on the master's mercy.

Once discovered, the employer has two options:

1. Refuse the sweet deals his steward offered to debtors, and look really bad in the community.
2. Write off the losses as acts of goodwill and let the scoundrel experience mercy once again.

The Rich Man chooses the latter and, in fact, commends the shrewd employee for coming up with such a creative solution.

A second school of thought sees the employer and employer as equally crooked. This view takes into account the Old Testament prohibition of usury (i.e., charging interest on loans to the needy). The idea here is that the steward can discount the debts down to the original principal by removing the usurious interest charges. In this interpre-

tation, the master cannot say anything about his steward's discount deals without exposing his own usurious schemes, so he keeps quiet and commends the scoundrel for his creativity ("shrewdness").

Discussion Questions

1. Of the two schools of thought, which one do you think Jesus communicated? (i.e., a merciful manager or a crooked manager?)
2. Are we supposed to look at this story as an example of what to do...or what not to do?

Application

Under either interpretation the point of the parable is that God appreciates human creativity. Not for dishonest purposes, but for Kingdom purposes. Jesus calls for "people of the light" (i.e., his followers) to apply themselves in shrewd and creative ways to solve the problems facing this broken world. Jesus wants us to use our resources (e.g., money, possessions, influence) to creatively advance his cause in the world. Can you imagine how rapidly the Kingdom would advance today if the followers of Christ creatively used their resources for God's purposes in the world?

Discussion questions

1. How can the church be more creative in advancing God's Kingdom?
2. What is your youth group doing to be shrewd managers of God's Kingdom?

As you reflect on the parable and the video, consider that Jesus told these parables so that we could learn truth in the midst of our everyday lives. Because reveals himself through common experiences, and we should be able to find Jesus in the most unlikely places. Christ can "show up" while we're sitting in front of our computers at work, cooking dinner, or driving in traffic. It's great to learn during the big moments of our lives, but Christ clearly notes that learning about his love, his grace, and his mercy can be experienced in the most ordinary circumstances of our lives as well.

36 PARABLES

PURPLE BIBLE STUDY

Written by Craig McElvain

Film: *Sean*

Parable: *The Barren Big Tree*

Scripture: *Luke 13:6-9*

Interpreting *Sean*

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree explores grace, mercy, and judgment. It's likely that the vinedresser represents Jesus—the one fighting for delayed judgment on the barren fig tree.

Jesus was and is perfect. So why does the teacher in the video (who likely represents Jesus) assume some of the guilt? “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). When Jesus paid the price for us on the cross, he carried our sins and assumed our guilt. Like many of Jesus' parables, we don't know how this one ends. The fig tree gets one more year, but we don't know what happened to that tree—just like we don't know what Sean is going to do.

Cultural Background

The purpose of a fig tree is to bear fruit. But what do you do with something that refuses to fulfill its purpose? That's the question Jesus poses in the parable of the barren fig tree.

Israel had been given a task. Sealed with God's covenant, it was called to be a “light for the Gentiles” (see Isaiah 49). The problem was that they placed their light “under a bowl” (Matthew 5:15-16), and it obscured God rather than enlightening people concerning God.

So what's to be done? The owner of the vineyard says the barren fig tree is a waste of space, but the vinedresser intercedes for this fruitless fig tree. Jesus is the vinedresser who's been pruning for three years...and often to no avail. So he asks for another year to dig around and fertilize. This is the work of Jesus—offering us a second chance, one more opportunity to become fruitful under his tender care. But we must produce a response to God among the nations. This is exactly what happened in the early church era. The followers of Jesus went from a tiny minority of scared disciples to an empire-wide majority in a few hundred years! That's some fruitful growth.

Discussion Questions

1. It's likely that Jesus alludes to Israel as the barren fig tree; in what ways is the church not producing fruit today?
2. In what areas of your life do you feel barren?

Application

The question of fruitfulness remains for us today—are we fruitful? Are we extending God's Kingdom? Or are we just wasting space on the ground? A book by Ron Sider (*The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*) poses the question of the American church's fruitfulness and cannot find a single area of distinction between Christians and non-Christians in our culture.

Will the vinedresser bypass us? Or even worse...cut us down? And just how long does his patience extend? Jesus isn't talking here about forgiveness (that was answered on the cross); he's talking about usefulness. It's entirely possible to be forgiven but fruitless.

And what about me?

Do I serve any good purpose, or am I just taking up space?

Discussion Questions

1. Is Jesus instructing us on being patient with others? Is there something to be learned about how we should deal with other barren fig trees?
2. In what ways have you been like the landowner (i.e., the principal in the video)? Ready to cut down the tree? In what ways have you been like the vinedresser (i.e., the teacher in the video), pleading for mercy for another? In what ways have you been like the fig tree (i.e., Sean in the video), deserving judgment, but spared?

As you reflect on the parable and the video, consider that Jesus told these parables so that we could learn truth in the midst of our everyday lives. Because he reveals himself through common experiences, and we should be able to find Jesus in the most unlikely places. Christ can “show up” while we're sitting in front of our computers at work, cooking dinner, or driving in traffic. It's great to learn during the big moments of our lives, but Christ clearly notes that learning about his love, his grace, and his mercy can be experienced in the most ordinary circumstances of our lives as well.