

Week 1: The Sower - Mark 4:1-20 & Matthew 13:1-23

- **Who does the sower represent in this parable? What does the seed represent? Who are the plants? What about the soil?**

Perhaps it is easiest to explain this parable by starting with the seed. The seed represents the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, so the sower would be the person evangelizing. On the path of his life, the seed is spread to those whom he encounters, and the plants represent the faith in the people he spreads the word to. The soil is a picture of the hearts and lives of people who hear the gospel. In the parable we see a hard heart, a distracted heart, and a worldly heart.

- **What is the goal of Satan in this passage? What tools does he use to accomplish this goal?**

Satan, in the parable, is doing all that he can to kill the plant, to squash the faith of people before it matures into fruitful Christianity. For the seeds along the path, Satan comes and devours them before anything can happen. For the seeds on rocky ground, Satan brings trials and persecution into their life. Because they don't have good roots, they cannot survive the hard times. The seeds that are thrown near thorns refers to the people who hear the gospel and begin to grow, but the distractions of worldly things hinder true growth. Here Satan is using things that aren't inherently bad to distract from Christ and cause our focus to be diverted. We call these objects or values idols.

- **Just as a farmer regularly tests his soil to make sure his crops will grow healthy - what actions can we take to maintain a heart of good soil?**

Ultimately, it is God who gives us a heart for Him, but there are some steps we can take to maintain the heart God has given us. First of all, staying active in our time in the word is vital to our spiritual growth. God has given us his written word so that we may know him better and worship him in his glory. The more time we spend with him in this way, the better our lives will reflect his son. Secondly, we can spend time in prayer. God is not distant and removed from our lives. He desires that we communicate with him, and what a joy that should be for us - that the holy God of the universe desires time with me! Third, spending time in community with fellow believers. God not only desires a relationship with us, but created us for relationship to each other. In this, we can build each other up and help each other stay focused on Christ.

- **Describe times when you or someone you knew showed to be one of these soil types.**

Personal reflection.

- **Does the sower know how each seed will sprout? How then should we respond?**

Just as we don't know which seed will turn into a healthy, fruit producing tree, we cannot know which people will hear the gospel and turn into a healthy, fruit producing Christian. With that in mind, we should share the gospel with everyone, no matter what their life currently looks like. Some may prove to be rocky ground, some overcome by thorns, and some snatched up by the birds immediately. Still, we should always pray that the word penetrates their hearts and present the gospel with as much clarity and conviction as we can. Their eternity depends on it.

- **Who among your family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers can your Grace Community be praying for, as you seek to share the gospel with them?**

Week 2: The Prodigal Son - Luke 15:11-33

- **Why did the younger son leave? What do you think he was expecting?**

It's important to note that the youngest son does not seem to have a poor home life when he leaves. His father seemed to have plenty of wealth and displays affection for his sons in the story, so we should assume he wasn't leaving troubles behind. Instead, the youngest son ventures out on his own in the hopes that there is something better, something more meaningful, than what his father offers. He takes his inheritance and seeks whatever joys money can buy. He must feel like there's something out there that will make him feel more fulfilled, more complete.

- **It's easy to see how the brothers differed, but in what ways were they the same in this story?**

Though the story begins with the younger son asking for his inheritance, the father splits his wealth up for both boys. The older receives his share, as well. In this way, they are both generously given that which they did not earn. An inheritance is something that you receive simply because of your relationship to the one who earned it. Both of the sons were seeking wealth from their father.

Though the focus is often placed on the younger brother in this parable, both of the sons are attempting to control the father in this story - just in vastly different ways. Tim Keller says it best in his book "Prodigal God"

"Neither son loved the father for himself. They both were using the father for their own self-centered ends rather than loving, enjoying, and serving him for his own sake. This means that you can rebel against God and be alienated from him either by breaking his rules or by keeping all of them diligently. It's a shocking message: Careful obedience to God's law may serve as a strategy for rebelling against God."

Also, the older son treats his father unfairly in the story by responding with anger to the celebration. Just as the younger son is greeted by a loving father who wishes to see him reunited to the family, the father anxiously asks the older to return to the party. He wants to celebrate with both boys, not just the younger.

- **Which person in the parable do you identify with, and why? Is it always that person, or do you sometimes vary between multiple characters?**

Personal Reflection

- **How are you challenged by this parable?**

Personal Reflection

- **What characteristics of God can we learn from this parable?**

We can see from this parable that God is slow to anger (Ps. 103:8) and that he lavishly gives to his children. God also does not determine if we are valued or loved because of our actions, instead, He loves us and values us despite our actions (Romans 3:28).

- **Describe a time when you experienced God's grace.**

Personal Reflection

Week 3: The Vineyard Workers - Matthew 20:1-16

- **Who are the laborers and who is the master in this parable?**

The master in this parable is God, and the laborers are Christians. It's important to note that the men are not laborers until they are hired in service to the master. The men were standing idly until God called them.

- **Were the laborers treated fairly? Why or why not?**

Personal reflection, but consider what the laborers each agreed to before they started working for the master.

- **What does this tell us about God's kingdom?**

In the kingdom, we are not rewarded based on our works as Christians, but rather based on the generosity of our master. Christ has told us that anyone who believes in him will have eternal life (John 11:25). That didn't come with a stipulation of how long he must believe or how many actions he needs to perform in his life to merit salvation. It's the same salvation for all who believe, no matter when or how it's played out.

- **At what stage in life were you called into God's kingdom? How does that impact the way you share your faith?**

Personal reflection.

- **We see some of the laborers respond with envy and jealousy. Where does this come from, and how can we avoid having the same attitude?**

There is a sense of entitlement in the laborers who worked longer and harder than the new guys. They see that in the end of the day, no matter how long a man was in the vineyard, the master rewarded them the same. Aren't we so quick to respond the same way? We plead, "but God, I worked so hard for you. I deserve more!" How wrong we are to presume we've been underpaid.

Preaching the gospel to ourselves should be an everyday occurrence in the Christian life. If we truly got what we "deserved," we would die the death that Christ died in our place (Romans 6:23). We should have been on that cross with the wrath of God poured out on us. But Jesus took our sin, he paid our debt, and he gave us what we don't deserve - his righteousness. He was more than generous with us.

Once we truly understand this truth, we can avoid the attitude of the laborers in the parable. By focusing on Christ's work on the cross, we labor out of love and joy - not because we're trying to "get what we're due."

- **Do you ever struggle with comparing your work to the works of others around you? Do you feel like others deserve more or less than you?**

Personal reflection.

Week 4: Parable of the Talents - Matthew 25:14-30

- **What can we learn about God and his character from this parable?**

We can see from this parable that God is one who entrusts his people with things in this world - whether they be money, power, or skills. To some, he gives quite a bit, and to others, he may give a little less. No matter the amount that God gives us, he still has the same expectations for his people - that they would put to use whatever God gives them, not holding on to it in secret.

- **Why was the master angry at the man who hid his talent? What does the man's speech reveal about his character?**

The master returns to find two of the servants not only using what he had given them, but gladly presenting the profits of their efforts to the master. The third one had not. From fear, he hides the talent for safe keeping until his master returns. At least he'll have the little bit to return back to him. Unlike his counterparts, he showed his true heart for the master - thinking him to be an unfair man who takes what the others have earned. He does not trust his master to be good to him.

It's interesting how quickly the servant forgets who gave him the talent to begin with, but how often do we do the same? We begin to accumulate wealth in this world, but when God asks us to use it for his kingdom, we often forget who entrusted us with the money to begin with (Deuteronomy 8:17-18). Or we move up the corporate ladder and have influence over our companies, but we're afraid to share the gospel with our coworkers because the job may be taken from us. We forget that God was the one who gave us this position to begin with! Just as the servant thought he was keeping his master's money safe, we too think we are protecting what is given to us - but are we doing what God intends us to use these gifts for?

- **If you had the opportunity to speak to the man with one talent before the master returns, what would you say to him?**

Personal reflection.

- **What gifts has God given to you? How are you using those gifts for the good of his kingdom? Which gifts are you not employing for his kingdom right now?**

Personal reflection.

- **What action is God telling you to take at this moment? How can your Grace Community help you take this step?**

Personal reflection.

Week 5: Hidden Treasure / Pearl of Great Price - Matthew 13:44-46

- **Is this parable more about the cost of the kingdom, or the value of the kingdom?**

Yes.

These parables not only show us the value of the kingdom, but also the cost of the kingdom. These factors go hand in hand here. The men in both parables first recognize the value of the item they find. Seeing its great worth, they respond by with joy to pay the cost. They gladly give everything they own for the treasure/pearl. The cost is only put in perspective when we truly understand the value.

- **What is keeping you from seeing the value of God's kingdom right now?**

Personal reflection

- **Does your life display a high value of the kingdom? Why or why not?**

Personal reflection

- **Just as the men in these stories sold everything to buy something else - what can you "buy or sell" this week?**

Personal reflection

- **What circumstances in life would cause you to be willing to sell everything? Why?**

Personal reflection. Consider what the greater value is with any response that comes to mind. For example - if my children were to become very sick, I would gladly sell all of my possessions for their treatments. The greater value in this example would be the health of my children, making the cost of selling everything that provides me comfort in life an easy decision. That which I value more, I will gladly pay the cost.

Week 6: The Good Samaritan - Luke 10:25-37

- **Why does the lawyer ask Jesus who his neighbor is? What answer do you think he expected?**

The scripture tells us that he was looking to justify himself by asking this question to Jesus. He is testing Jesus, not really looking for instruction from someone he admires or views as a superior. If he could just get Jesus to answer that our neighbors are only people who attend our church, or that our neighbors are only people who live on our block, the lawyer would be justified in not helping everyone in need. The burden would be very little on his life. Perhaps this is what he is looking for - the answer that lets him off the hook.

Many of the Jewish people of the day would have interpreted that their neighbors were only of Jewish decent. A gentile would not be considered a neighbor in their eyes. There is no obligation to help them. Yet in this parable, we see the “neighbors” of this beaten man walk by him without offering any help. It’s the one whom they would scorn that bends down and helps out. He is the true neighbor.

- **What is the significance of both the levite and the priest passing the man first?**

Both the levite and the priest are interesting characters to pass by the man on the road, and I’m sure Jesus did not choose these men by accident. Both the levite and the priest are actually fulfilling the law by passing this man on the road. We see that these men are passing between Jericho and Jerusalem, meaning they are making their way to perform duties in the temple. Old Testament laws require ceremonial cleansing before they could enter, and if they were to touch this man, they would be unclean again, and therefore unfit to serve in the temple.

The lawyer rightly acknowledges that loving your neighbor is the command of the Old Testament. Here Jesus presents two characters who are fulfilling the commands of the law, but missing the intent. They are so focused on the rules and obligations that they pass by the man in need.

Who comes to save this man? None other than a person who the Jewish people disliked the most - a Samaritan. The Samaritan didn’t just casually stop and ask if the man was ok; he lavishly cared for a man in need. Bound his wounds, gave him comfort, paid for his care, and gave him true neighborly affection. A man who would not be considered righteous by the Jewish traditions is fulfilling the law better than the public symbols of the Jewish faith. Likewise, we should make sure to fulfill the letter of the law with missing the intent (Matt 23:23).

- **Think of a time when you both needed a neighbor and were a neighbor to someone in need. How can both instances be used to witness to the person?**
Personal reflection.
- **How can you care for a neighbor in need this week?**
Personal reflection.
- **Spend some time discussing future service projects with your Grace Community.**

Week 7: The Unforgiving Servant - Matthew 18:21-35

- **Are you quick to forgive others when they sin against you? Why or why not?**
Personal reflection

- **Who are represented by the characters in this story? How does it reflect our understanding of sin?**

The master from this parable represents God, and the servant represents followers of Christ. We see in this parable that the servant owes a very large debt to the master - and this is true of our standing with God. Even in the sins that we would try to justify as small, the debt is huge. The bible teaches us that the wages of all sin is death. But just as the master forgives the servant of all his debt because of his pleading, God has forgiven us all of our sin because of his abundant grace.

- **What does the servant reveal about his heart when he demands the money another servant owed him?**

When the servant demands his payment from the other, he seems to be showing what's really at stake in his heart. Shortly after being forgiven a big debt from his master, he demands the much smaller amount from his fellow servant. What may not be so clear on the surface is where he places himself in relation to the master. By not forgiving the other servant, this man is showing that he sees himself as more valuable than the master. This debt, even though smaller in monetary amount, is larger in his eyes because it's against him, the more important person. He is more deserving of the payment than his master was of his own debt. What a small view of God, if we think we're more worthy of judgement than he is.

- **How can reflecting on the forgiveness we received from God fuel our own forgiveness of others? (see Luke 7:41-50).**

We need an appropriate view of our sins. Too often we try to justify ourselves by claiming our sins are small, and therefore easy to forgive. We like to think that we're pretty good people most of the time. Once we realize that this is a lie from the devil, that we are totally depraved creatures who are constantly affronting the king of the universe, we can begin to see how greatly we've been forgiven. From that deeper understanding of our own forgiveness, we will overflow with forgiveness to others.

- **What kind of behavior should we expect from people who have been forgiven their sins? Why do you think some Christians have trouble forgiving others?**

Consider the implications stated in this parable. The debt owed to the master is far greater than the amount the fellow servant owed to him. We would expect that one who understands how greatly he has been forgiven would respond with grace and mercy to those who wrong him.

Perhaps we as Christians have a difficult time forgiving others because we do not have a concept of how fully and incredibly we have been forgiven of our transgressions. We shouldn't ask, "how big was their sin against me," when looking at the wrongs from a brother or sister. We should ask ourselves, "how big is Jesus' forgiveness in my life?" Only when we have a big view of our Lord will we have the capacity to forgive our brothers and sisters. (Rom 2:3-4)

- **How can you show forgiveness to someone who has wronged you? What steps can you take this week?**

Week 8: The Rich Man & Lazarus - Luke 16:19-41

- **As the story starts, most would believe the rich man was favored by God - that his wealth was a blessing. Does this parable say that wealth is bad?**

This parable is not teaching us that the accumulation of wealth is a bad thing. Jesus isn't saying that having money guarantees us a future in hell. Wealth can be both a blessing from God or a distraction from Satan. It's how we view money that reveals our hearts. Like the parable of the talents - are we using our gifts from God the way he intends for us, or are we hiding it in the ground for safe keeping?

The rich man allows Lazarus to sit at his gate in pain and hunger. Though the rich man could have easily provided for the man, he refused and allowed him to die. This is not what Jesus teaches about how a believer should act (Matt 25:41-46). In this instance, we can see that the money in this man's life became a distraction from Jesus. He didn't go to hell because he was rich - he went to hell because he could not see past his money to the messiah.

- **Was Lazarus taken to heaven because his life on earth was hard? Or was he taken to heaven for a different reason?**

There is only one way to heaven. Lazarus did not punch his ticket into heaven because God was rewarding him for persevering a life of hardship and difficulty. Jesus tells us clearly that the only way into heaven is faith in him as your lord and savior (John 14:6). Lazarus could only be in heaven because he trusted in the messiah. You can say he went to heaven in spite of his circumstances, not because of them.

- **Do you have something in your life that is keeping your attention away from Christ?**

Personal reflection.

- **Why does Abraham not send Lazarus to warn the rich man's brothers of hell?**

Abraham tells the rich man that he will not send Lazarus back from the dead because they will not believe him. The idea of heaven and hell are not foreign to the brothers - they've heard the warnings from Moses and the prophets. God's inspired word is readily available to them, and it's clear. If that has not opened their hearts to believe in the messiah, a man coming to tell them face to face will not either.

- **Have you ever wished for a miracle to happen so you might believe? What does this parable tell us about such things?**

Personal reflection.

We have all that we need to believe in the scriptures. While we may at times think that it would be great to see a miracle, the miracle itself will not cause us to believe. How many times have we seen something amazing happen in this world and then fail to explain it with science? Cancer disappearing in the pre-op evaluation. Tornadoes destroying entire neighborhoods but leaving one house untouched. People say it's a fluke, explainable, or pay no mind.

Praise be to God that we already have all that we need. We have his written word, a book laying out his promises and love for us.

Week 9: Two Foundations - Matt. 7:24-27 & Luke 6:47-49

- **What does the foundation of the rock represent? What about the sand?**

The rock represents a life built on faith in Christ, and the sand is anything other than Christ. When we build our faith, it needs to be on the foundation of Christ alone. Anything else, including good things like the law of God or love for our neighbors, is sand. Christ alone must be the foundation of our faith, otherwise it is going to fall apart and we will not be saved from our sins.

Notice that the builder on the sand is someone who would have declared faith in Christ as well. It's not until the storm that his house falls down. The storms only revealed the truth that always existed - his faith was never built on Jesus.

- **If you could describe one area of shifting sand in your life, what would it be?**

Personal reflection.

- **What do the rains represent? Have you ever experienced a time of flooding in your life?**

The rains and winds represent the trials and tribulations we will face in this life. It's important to notice who has to deal with these times in the parable. Jesus isn't saying that building your life in him makes the storms disappear. Both builders have to endure the storms, but only one will make it through with his house still intact.

- **How can you ensure your foundation is in the rock instead of sand this week? This month? This year?**

Personal reflection.

- **Some of your friends may be building their houses on sand. How can you help them change locations?**

We should always share the gospel with our family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. We cannot assume that simply because they know the name of Jesus that they understand the gospel. Invite them to church, read the bible with them, invite them to join your Grace Community. Be active in the lives of people in your spheres of influence. God is putting you in their life for a reason.

- **Read 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. How does this shed more light on our building? How can your Grace Community help you build your house?**

Here we see that even among those who's faith is built on the right foundation, Jesus, there are some who continue to build with value. They construct a faith of sound doctrine and wise teachings, but others construct a house of wood and hay. Fires will come in their life and their faith will be tested. All of them built their house on the rock and will be saved, but some will be made more beautiful in the fire, while others will have to be rebuilt when it's burned down.