



PARABLES of *grace*

A Devotional Study Guide
for Lent 2019
at First Presbyterian Church Fort Collins

Welcome to this Lenten study guide for our series, *Parables of Grace!*

Having started with the opening verses at the end of December, we are in the midst of a deep dive into the Gospel of Matthew which will carry us all the way through to the Sunday following Easter, April 28. Within those four months, for this season of Lent, we will focus specifically on a set of Jesus' parables.

Parables are stories that are told to communicate a moral lesson or truth. One scholar further describes Jesus' use of parables as, "*an assault on the conventional way of viewing the world. It seeks to break the grip of the tradition on our understanding of viewing the world in order to allow us a glimpse of God's world.*" We also recognize that one of the challenges and opportunities of a parable is that the breadth of interpretation varies widely. Therefore, our hope during these six weeks is that this study will open up new ways of understanding the nature of God and God's kingdom and, if you are studying with others, will further expand your own faith journey through the diversity of perspectives and insights that others bring to the conversation, too.

During my own time of study and prayer putting together this series and then writing this devotional guide, I've been struck by the ways that these parables might tell us something unexpected and radical about the nature of God's grace. So here's a caution: the grace we encounter may turn upside down our notions of what is fair or right. We may not feel that we deserve it, but more often that others do not deserve this grace either from God or from us. My prayer is that these stories will inspire and challenge us, opening our eyes to see God's world through Jesus' eyes. Over the next '40 days,' whether you find yourself in the midst of a valley of shadows or ascending the mountaintops, may these parables help remind you that our Creator God meets you right where you are, calls you his beloved, and extends to you abundant and life-giving grace.

The study guide will take us through Palm/Passion Sunday on April 14. During Holy Week, you are invited to attend midday services at noon, Monday through Friday, when we will be led by local pastors and other leaders exploring scenes from Jesus' final week before his trial and crucifixion. Finally, our Easter Sunday services will bring us to a conclusion of the story from Matthew's Gospel, though we hope it is only the beginning of the next chapter of our story as God's faithful community.

Peace,

Corey Nelson

How to Use this Study Guide

There is no wrong way to use this study. This study is designed to be used in a small group (and it's not too late to find one!) and can also be used for individual study. You could look at parts of the study every day, or you might find yourself looking back after two weeks away.

You are invited to join a **small group** during Lent to travel through this journey and study together. Being a part of a small group will hopefully enhance your own understanding of these stories and help you build and deepen meaningful relationships with others in the congregation. If you join a small group, we ask that you

- join in prayer with and for one another
- welcome one another with hospitality and openness
- respect each other's views and perspectives
- maintain confidentiality and discretion within the group

share in the responsibility of organizing and facilitating the group (whether this means bringing snacks or beverages, making sure there are extra Bibles, etc.)

The **Study Schedule** at the beginning provides an overview of the specific parables we will read from the Gospel of Matthew. You can see which parable will be the focus of worship each week. ***You could use that corresponding study in the week preceding the sermon to begin to think about the scripture before the sermon, or the week following as a way to dive deeper into the story after exploring the story in worship.***

In this Lenten devotional, you will find materials to guide your individual or group study each week. After an opening question, I have included "**A Starting Place...**" a reflection from a professor or pastor or church leader. My intention is not that this one perspective will define and then limit the scope of your own study and discernment, but simply provide another (possibly new?) lens through which you can interpret the parable alongside your own experiences and perspectives. The questions that follow are meant to invite you to focus both on the parable itself and then on some possible applications to your daily life. However, they are only meant to be a guide to get you thinking and should not limit your study or discussion. These questions might lead you to other discussions and reflections, which is wonderful! And you certainly do not need to answer every question. The final question for each study is the same, "What does this parable teach us about God's grace?"

Each study ends with a **prayer**. This prayer could be prayed together in unison, alone in silence or with a leader. And you are certainly welcomed and encouraged to pray for other personal and communal concerns and celebrations on your heart! You might also find these short prayers can become a simple centering exercise to use throughout the week that you can come back to each day.

Study 1: Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Introductory Questions

What is one of your early or first memories of being in debt? ... student loans? credit card? a loan from a friend or family member? How did it feel to have that debt hanging over you?

Have you ever experienced a sudden and unexpected windfall or gift that erased a debt or covered a necessary expense that was looming?

Read the Story

Matthew 18:21-35

A Starting Place...

The context of Jesus' teaching in this passage is critically important. The issue here is not how many times an isolated individual should forgive some other random person who sins against him or her. Rather, the context is the community of faith. Peter asks his question in response to Jesus' previous teaching about the process the church should follow in dealing with sinners (vv. 15-20). So, the concern here is the life of the church and the practices necessary to build up the community of faith. At the heart of those practices is forgiveness, not as an isolated act, but as an ongoing activity among members of the community. Within this context, there can be no limit on forgiveness, because it is a never-ending practice that is essential to the life of the church. Dr. Charles Campbell, Professor of Homiletics, Duke University Divinity School.

Questions for Reflection

Why do you think Peter asks Jesus if he should forgive "as many as seven times?"

Are there potentially negative repercussions of forgiving too much? too often? too easily?

The parable that Jesus tells of the unforgiving servant, like many parables that we will encounter in Matthew, is told in extreme hyperbole. Why do you think Jesus uses such an exaggerated story in his reply to Peter?

Why do you think the king in the parable chooses to erase or forgive the debt that is owed to him rather than give the servant more time to repay as was requested?

If, as Dr. Campbell suggests, we read this passage in the context of earlier verses (18:15-20), then there seems to be a larger lesson both about holding one another accountable in the church and forgiving one another. How would you describe this dynamic as a "both/and" rather than an "either/or?"

What role could/should the church community play in modeling both accountability and forgiveness for the wider community outside of the church?

What typically stands in the way of you being able to forgive someone?

What is the result of harboring bitterness and un-forgiveness in your heart? What do we deny for ourselves by refusing to be merciful to others?

How can we move from thinking of forgiveness as a particular act and instead live into it as an ongoing lifestyle?

What does this parable teach us about God's grace?

Prayer

Merciful God, you have filled our lives with a deluge of love and grace. Yet we are too often stingy with forgiveness for others. While Christ's sacrifice on the cross removed the weight of our sin, we continue to blend in with a world that is intent on keeping score and settling debts. May the grace we extend to others, small in comparison with all we've received, help strengthen the church's ministry of love and compassion. In our generosity of spirit, may we make a witness as those who have been forgiven much and who seek to have Christ like grace shine through our lives. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Study 2: Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

Introductory Questions

What was the first job you held for which you were paid? How much did you earn? Did it seem like a lot of money at the time? Does it seem like a lot of money now?

Read the Story

Matthew 20:1-16

A Starting Place...

Matthew writes for a mixed congregation that includes both longtime Jewish Christians (who may have known Jesus personally) and others who have joined only recently, many of whom are Gentile converts. Regardless of the particularities of Matthew's own congregation, he speaks to the abiding question of God's relationship to Israel, as well as the perennial struggle between religious people who see themselves as doing the lion's share of God's work and those who do not seem to carry their weight. (The parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32 expresses a similar conflict.) Hard-working "good" people have always asked: what kind of God would offer the same reward to those who have earned it and those who have not?

The tradition has consistently answered: a just God. For this to be true, however, workers must recognize the opportunity to work in the vineyard (whether it represents Israel, individual virtue, the church, or the cause of justice in the world) as a gift in itself. There is no room for human pride, since one's only choice is either to answer the call to work in God's kingdom, or to stand idle and waste one's life altogether. Dr. Kathryn Blanchard, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Alma College

Questions for Reflection

The landowner agrees to pay the first workers (v. 2) "the usual daily wage," but the second round of workers (v. 4) "what is right," and the third round of workers (v. 7) are told nothing of what to expect in payment. What do you think each set of workers expected at the end of the day?

Do you think the landowner hires more workers later in the day because he needs more work to get done or because he wants more people to have the opportunity to work?

Do the workers hired first have a legitimate reason to grumble against the landowner?

If you're going to get paid the same anyway, what is the advantage of working all day versus only the final hour?

How do potential lessons from this parable conflict with our sense of fairness? conflict with our economic systems?

How is the mindset of the first hired laborers a potential danger for those who have been in the community of faith (and “*working in the vineyard*”) for a long time?

In contrast, what is the “good news” for those who are the latest to join in the work?

When have you felt like a laborer in God’s kingdom who has been working ‘all day?’ ... when have you felt like you arrived at the end of the day?

What does the parable teach us about God’s grace?

Prayer

Holy God, guide us away from the ways of the world to hear Your call and follow You. Guide us away from the temptations to put ourselves first and see that we are the body of Christ, that we need each other. We all have different abilities and gifts, and all of us are necessary for the building up of your reign on earth as it is in heaven. Help us to see that we need others, that we cannot go this alone, and that You desire for us to reach out in love to all. May our hearts be open to Your desire for all of us, that we may be one, as You and Christ are one. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Study 3: Parable of the Wedding Banquet

Introductory Questions

What is one of the greatest events, parties or “banquets” you have ever been invited to attend?

What invitation(s) have you had to turn down and why?

Read the Story

Matthew 22:1-14

A Starting Place...

Set in the context of Matthew’s continuing critical conversation with the chief priests and Pharisees, the parable of the Wedding Banquet is a summary account of a central theological teaching found in all of scripture: the subtle interrelation of the grace of election, of God’s will to have a people, and the consequential obligation of obedience, of faithful and grateful response. This interrelation is close to the heart of the dynamic mystery of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Mirroring the relationship between YHWH and Israel, the parable presents the relation between the divine indicative and the consequential imperative that is laid upon us as God’s people. The indicative is prior to and constrains the imperative. In summary terms: I am your God (Israel, and, in due course, the church, had no choice in the matter of election), and you shall be my people (this election calls forth obedience).

There is an inevitable tension between election by grace and the obedience of life. Perhaps it is best to say that we should place ourselves somewhere within the spectrum of tension without resolving it. In other words, we have here in story form an account of the theology of covenant relations between God and humankind. Dr. Andrew Purves, Professor of Reformed Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

Questions for Reflection

Assuming it would have been a great honor to be invited to a wedding feast thrown by the king, why would those who had been invited ignore the invitation?

How is it better for the king to have a banquet hall filled with total strangers from off of the street rather than to simply cancel the feast?

We are told that the slaves “gathered all whom they found, both good and bad,” which calls to mind the parable of the weeds and the wheat growing together in Matthew 13:24-30. If we read these two parables side by side, what do they tell us about the nature of God’s character and the Kingdom of God?

Those invited first refuse to come and are therefore pronounced “not worthy” (Matt. 22:8).

The king then sends his invitation to the streets and many come to the feast, “both bad and good” (Matt. 22:10). How does this parable appear to define ‘worthiness?’

Reflecting on Dr. Purves’ words above, how does the parable shape our understanding of the dynamic between the free gift of God’s grace on the one hand and our invitation (obligation?) to respond to that gift on the other hand?

Beginning in verse 11, the king finds a man without a wedding garment. Why do you think this man dressed inappropriately and why is his punishment so dire?

John Calvin, in his commentary on this text, suggests that later references in the New Testament, such as Galatians 3:27, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” So Calvin believes the wedding guest received this judgment because he refused to be “clothed with Christ.” Do you agree with this interpretation? How does it expand your understanding of the parable?

In your journey of faith, why do you sometimes resist the invitation to come to the banquet? To enter the Kingdom of God?

What does this parable teach us about God’s grace?

Prayer

You call us to your feast, Gracious God, but our busy lives keep us from responding. You remember every word we utter, every prayer we whisper, but we forget all the little ways you care for us. You would make your gentleness known through us, but we lash out in anger and fear towards others. Forgive us, God of all hope, and remember your Servant, Jesus Christ. In him, we can live in your way. Through him, we can learn the dreams you have for us. With him, we can open our arms and embrace all the people we meet. As we are forgiven by God, we can begin to reflect on all those ways in which we can live justly, act honorably, love completely. This is indeed good news for us. At the Wedding Feast, we are fed with grace, and nourished with joy, so we may go and bring hope and peace to everyone we meet. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Study 4: Parable of the Talents

Introductory Questions

South African President Nelson Mandela once joked that he regretted never developing his talent as a boxer in order to become the heavyweight champion of the world. Is there a “talent” from your past that you regret never developing?

Read the Story

Matthew 25:14-30

Background and Contextual Information

You might approach this story about the wealthy man who entrusts his property to three servants by talking to an investment manager. Ask him or her what you have to do and the risks you must be willing to take in order to double your money. You will learn that if you want to double your money quickly, the risk escalates dramatically...The point here (of the parable) is not really about doubling your money and accumulating wealth. It is about living. It is about investing. It is about taking risks. It is about Jesus himself and what he has done and what is about to happen to him. Mostly it is about what he hopes and expects of them (the servants) after he is gone. It is about being a follower of Jesus and what it means to be faithful to him, and so, finally, it is about you and me.

The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently. It is called sloth (one of the ancient church's seven deadly sins) which means not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity, playing it safe, investing nothing...digging a hole and burying the money in the ground. Rev. Dr. John Buchanan, Pastor Emeritus at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago

Questions for Reflection

Why do you think the master gives different amounts of talents to his servants in the beginning of the parable? Is this fair?

After each of the first two servants present their double portion of talents, the master says, “you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things.” How do you interpret this response as an insight into the character of God? What does it suggest about our life of discipleship?

What reasons does the third servant give for burying the one talent? In what ways do you sympathize with these reasons or not?

What talent(s) in your life have you been unable or unwilling to ‘invest’ for the Kingdom of God?

Asked another way, what risks might you be invited to take in response to this study?

In your family, community and beyond – are there others that you might encourage in overcoming fear and risking the investment of their talent(s)?

What does this parable teach us about God's grace?

Prayer

Lord God, we give you thanks for all your gifts to us—for daily food, for health, for each breath we take, for freedom to choose, and for the gifts of your word, your power and your love. Our hearts are truly overwhelmed, O God, when we consider how you have entrusted so much to us. May we be worthy of that trust—may we be a people who are unafraid to live as fully and as richly as you want us to live. Help us, O God, as followers of Jesus, to multiply all that you have given us, to risk spreading your word and perhaps see it misunderstood, to gamble by loving those whom others think worthy only of hate, to take chances by doing good to those who have not done good to us. Help us be faith filled and desire to increase your glory and your goodness in this world. Make us people who share in both word and deed that which you have given to us.

Study 5: Parable of the Sheep and Goats

Introductory Questions

What is one of your earliest memories of seeing someone feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, etc.?

Has there been a time when you were either literally or figuratively sick, naked, imprisoned, etc., and someone reached out to meet your need?

Read the Story

Matthew 25:31-46

A Starting Place...

In many ways, Matthew's depiction of the last judgment is like a wellness check at the doctor's office. Its purpose is not to condemn or scare, but to provide a snapshot of our overall health, development, learning and growth that should lead to new habits and ways of life. After all, as our doctor wants us to flourish, so does our Creator...The image of the Son of Man one day separating sheep and goats is a diagnostic tool designed to inspire faithfulness, root out self-centered living, and help each of us measure who and where we are as we grow in the likeness of Christ.

In fact, the wellness check is so important that throughout this entire teaching block of Matthew (24:1 – 25:46) the negative warnings are presented in more abrasive detail than the positive affirmations. Telling the story so that the eventual outcome of misguided attitudes and choice will not, and in fact cannot, happen because we now know better, Jesus teaches that what and whom we choose make a difference. He states clearly and forcefully that those who think there are no consequences to actions are mistaken. In a world that seems too big to be changed, our lives have more meaning and value than we imagine. Rev. Lindsay Armstrong, Director of New Church Development for the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta

Questions for Reflection

Both the sheep and the goats, those at the left and the right, are surprised by the judgment given to them. What do you make of them being equally surprised? Were they not paying attention to what they were or were not doing?

How do you reconcile what we have been learning about God's grace with this story in which some are clearly "in" and some are clearly "out?"

Jesus tells those at the right hand that they are to "inherit" the kingdom. If we understand that an inheritance is simply received and not earned or achieved, how does this shape our interpretation of the story? ... our interpretation of why some are in and some are out?

Can you recall stories in the Gospels that give examples of meeting the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner?

Who are “the least of these” today in our community? In our nation? In our world?

What might we, individually and/or as a church community, be asked to do or to provide in order to respond to these needs?

Are there responses that would be easier for you to provide or to do? Harder to provide or to do?

If we view the story as a ‘wellness check,’ as Rev. Armstrong suggests above, how would you assess your own wellness right now on your journey of faith?

What does this parable teach us about God’s grace?

Prayer

It’s a tough thing for us to learn, Jesus, how you hide in the most unlikely places; how you beckon us into life and compassion by disguising yourself in broken humanity. But, when our eyes are opened, we discover that we are never far from your heart, from your kingdom. And so we ask you to show yourself to us again, and lead us into prayerful action. Teach us to welcome you by welcoming those in whom your image is hidden and by working, in our small worlds, to make visible your kingdom where all are welcomed. Amen.

Study 6: Palm/Passion Sunday—Jesus Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

Introductory Questions

What is the most exciting parade or large public event you've attended? What made it exciting? Did you get caught up in the enthusiasm of the crowd?

Read the Story

Matthew 21:1-11

A Starting Place...

Who is this? Is this not the question of the day we somewhat confusedly call both Palm Sunday and the Sunday of the Passion? Who is this one hailed by peasants and lepers and cripples and prostitutes and day laborers as messiah? Who is this who, though every inch a country hick and peasant, yet rides into the city like a king? Who is this whose devoted followers soon turn on him, as the disciples disperse, his friend denies, and the crowds accuse? Who is this who is tried by both religious and political elite and found, not just wanting, but also threatening, an enemy to the establishment? Who is this who is dragged through the streets of Jerusalem and hauled to the execution grounds? Who is this who is hung on a cross abandoned and forsaken?

There is nothing about Jesus -- his entry into the city, his confrontation with authority, his brutal and lonely death -- that would inspire anyone to devotion. He comes not in power but in weakness, not in might but vulnerability, not in judgment but in mercy, not in vengeance but in love. Nothing about him conforms to the expectations of a world that has come to believe above all things that might makes right or, at the very least, that might wins.

Who is this? This is Jesus, the One we confess died not in order to make it possible for God to love us but rather to demonstrate that God already does love us and that God's love is our only hope. This is Jesus, the one we proclaim each week as messiah and lord, source of hope and healing. This is Jesus, the paradigm of God's action in the world, whose story comes to a climax this week in order that our story might begin anew and afresh with the hope and promise of a good ending. Rev. David Lose, Pastor of Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis

Questions for Reflection

Why do you think Jesus rode into town on a donkey? Would he have had other options? Why did he not just walk?

What was Jesus doing? What did it symbolize? Was it confrontational?

What were the expectations of the crowd?

We often imagine the crowd gathered and the spectacle it must have been to see the branches waving and hear the crowd cheering. But what if we try to zoom in on particular people and imagine what they were thinking. What if some of the characters from the parables had come to life and were standing by the roadside that day. What might each one be feeling and thinking as Jesus rode by:

- The unforgiving servant who was forgiven by the King, but would not forgive another
- The laborer in the vineyard who was hired late, but earned a full day's wage
- The stranger seated at the table of the King's wedding banquet
- The servant who was too afraid to take a risk with the master's talent

The surprised "sheep" – the one who has inherited the Kingdom because of his or her response to those in need

The Gospel of Matthew is written, in part, to help us understand the nature of "the Messiah," the one who saves us. What have you learned during this season about how and from what we are being saved by Jesus?

This gathered crowd is excited for Jesus to enter the city. They praise him and exclaim "Hosanna" as they welcome him into Jerusalem. And yet, this is the same crowd that will turn on him just one week later. How can that be?

In what ways are we quick to turn our backs on the invitation to the follow Jesus? What aspects of following are hardest to accept or to live into?

What has our study of Jesus' parables taught us about God's grace?

Prayer

Gracious and Loving God, we give you thanks for these parables that teach us how you love us and want to have a relationship with us. We are so grateful that you came to live among us so that we might know you better and so that you would wash away our sin. Thank you for this season of Lent and for the chance to grow closer to you through worship and study. We know you love us no matter where we are on our journey and no matter how close we gather or far we run. We proclaim "Hallelujah" as you enter the gates of Jerusalem even as we look ahead to the grief and lament of Good Friday and then the joy and wonder of Easter. Praise to you, our God! Amen.

2019 Lenten Study Schedule

Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Matthew 18:21-35

Sermon: Sunday, March 10

Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

Matthew 20:1-16

Sermon: Sunday, March 17

Parable of the Wedding Banquet

Matthew 22:1-14

Sermon: Sunday, March 24

Parable of the Talents

Matthew 25:14-30

Sermon: Sunday, March 31

Parable of the Sheep and Goats

Matthew 25:31-46

Sermon: Sunday, April 7

Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

Matthew 21:1-11

Sermon: Palm Sunday, April 14



Easter
at First Presbyterian Church Fort Collins
April 21, 2019
9:00 and 11:00 AM

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